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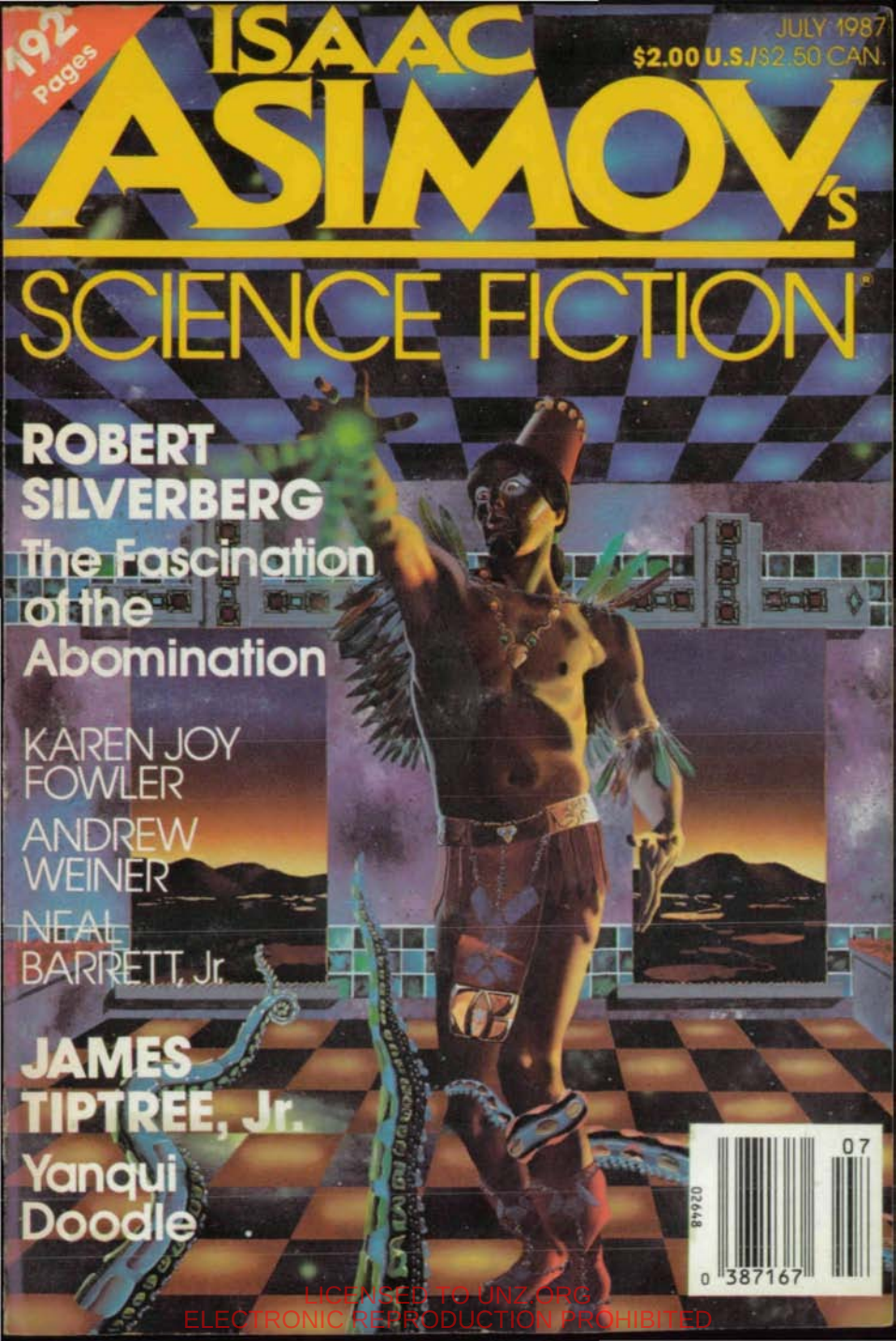

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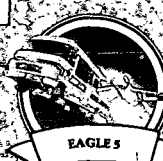

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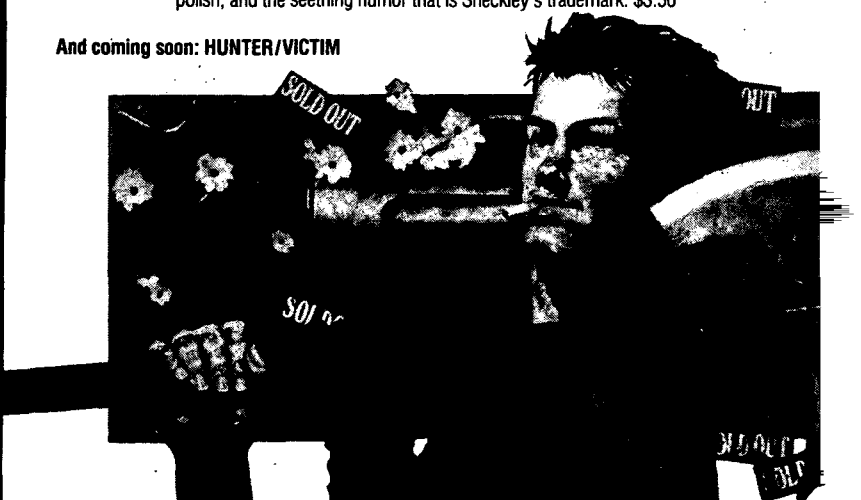

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EDITORIAL

ROMANCE

by Isaac Asimov

My contention, first voiced in my editorial "Outsiders, Insiders" (February 1986), to the effect that science fiction writers were a special case of whom more was demanded than of other writers raised some indignant demurrals. As a result I wrote my editorial "Specialization" (November 1986) in which I explained my views in greater detail.

That has not entirely helped. More indignant demurrals.

Well, I rather like that. I think it is a good thing when my editorials arouse controversy because I want what I write to encourage thought. Besides that, I am sometimes wrong, and I want to be enlightened when I am.

In any case, I have received a very thoughtful and useful letter from Shari Prange of Bonny Doon, California, which is too long to quote in full here, but I will quote the vital passages.

She points out that she has sold some science fiction, but, on the whole, has failed at it despite avid interest from childhood. (This is not really surprising. I have stated in my editorials that avid interest from childhood is necessary—but I have not sufficiently stressed that that is not sufficient. In other words, childhood interest is something you must have, but it is not *all* you must have.)

Ms. Prange says, "I do think you underestimate the obstacle presented by the necessity for scientific research as background for SF. This is probably because you have such a wealth of scientific knowledge already in your possession."

Actually, Ms. Prange, I did not come to the conclusion that a knowledge of science is unnecessary for SF writing just because I happen to have it. It's a matter of observation. Great science fiction writers like Ray Bradbury and Harlan Ellison have had no formal scientific education and have made no particular effort to self-educate themselves in science. They manage to write *around* science effectively. It is, to be sure, *easier* to write SF if you know science, but such knowledge, I continue to maintain, is not essential.

Ms. Prange, however, is a writer of romances, and, although I have not had the good fortune to have read her, I am willing to take it for granted that she is a good one.

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She says, "You say, '. . . any *good* science fiction writer can turn his hand to any other form of writing, and produce good work.' I disagree. You, for example, are definitely a *good* science fiction writer, but I think you would be incapable of writing a good romance. I don't say this out of vindictiveness, but because that is not where your talent lies. Neither should you shrug off the statement by saying that you have no interest in writing a romance. There is more involved than that.

". . . we [romance writers] have to create unique, breathing characters that have never lived before, and understand them better than they do themselves, or better even than their therapists might, *and make the readers care desperately about what happens to them.* Do you think this is easy?

". . . different categories have their own demands and difficulties for the writer. One should not dismiss too lightly the rigors of a field in which one has no experience or interest, and quite possibly no talent."

True enough. And I do not intend to minimize the skills required for *any* form of fiction writing. However, characterization is a necessity for *all* kinds of writing. A good writer who can create living, breathing characters can do it in a romance, in a mystery, in a horror story, in a western, in a sports story, in "mainstream" fiction, and so on. Similarly, suspense, description, believable dialogue, and many

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other components of any one form of writing happen to be components of every other form of writing, too. A good writer must possess the ability to handle all these components, and if he can, he can handle them in any form of writing. Which form he ends up doing is the one that happens to interest him most, but if you point a gun at him and give him a chance to read up on any other form so he can grasp the conventions, he can turn out adequate examples.

Science fiction is the only exception, I claim. It, too, must have characterization, suspense, description, dialogue, and anything else that is essential to fiction generally. *In addition*, it must have a social background that is significantly different from our own. Any story that *has* such a background is science fiction (though, of course, not necessarily *good* science fiction), while any story that *doesn't have* such a background is not science fiction.

And, I further maintain, since such a component is not *generally* necessary in all fiction, there is no reason why a fiction writer must have the ability to create such a background just because he is a writer. If he is a good writer in any field but science fiction, he can probably write well in all fields except science fiction. If he is a good science fiction writer, he can probably write well in all fields without exception.

This is all theory, of course. Ms. Prange, in effect, challenges me to put my typewriter where my mouth is, and proceed to write a good romance, if I'm so all-fired talented a science fiction writer. She says, "I think you would be incapable of writing a good romance."

Shall I, then, sit down and write one just to show the good Ms. Prange I can do it? I'd be tempted to do this, were it not for the fact that I have already done so—and not once, but a number of times. You see, "romance" is so general a property of fiction that it occurs in many a story (the vast majority in fact) that don't call themselves "romances" specifically. A romance is only a story where the romantic component is overwhelmingly prominent. Obviously, however, if a writer writes a mystery, or a horror story, or a western, or (even) a science fiction story in which the romantic component is important, he can, if he wishes, write another in which the romantic component is overwhelmingly prominent.

My science fiction novel, *The Gods Themselves* (Doubleday, 1972), is in three parts. The third part is a romance, darn it. However, the romance takes place on the Moon and I spend considerable time building and describing a self-consistent, completely believable Lunar society. This Lunar society, however, is not an irrelevancy; it plays an essential role in the course and resolution of the romance.

Because one doesn't frequently come across a story in which a self-consistent, completely believable Lunar society is built, it is that

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which attracts the reader's attention, and that third part is invariably described as science fiction and (I hope) *good* science fiction. And because romance is so often a part of all kinds of fiction, it tends to go unremarked in the presence of the much more pronounced taste of something like science fiction. However, Ms. Prange, if you read the third part of *The Gods Themselves*, I think you will note the presence of the romance beneath the science fiction, so to speak, and (in my opinion) it is a reasonably good romance.

For that matter, the second part of *The Gods Themselves* is also a romance. However, because it involves not only a different world, but totally alien intelligences for whom both love and sex are totally different than they are with us, it is hard to see the romance.

Then there is my novel *The Naked Sun* (Doubleday, 1957). It is a science fiction story, without doubt, but it is also a mystery story, without doubt, *and* it is a romance, too. In fact, Damon Knight, in reviewing the novel, tended to dismiss the science fiction and mystery aspects of it as (in *his* opinion, blast him) quite run-of-the-mill, but was struck by the romance. Why, he wanted to know, if Asimov could write romance like that, did Asimov bother writing science fiction? To which the answer was that, regardless of how well I might write romance, that was not what I wanted to do. I wanted to write science fiction.

In my recent novels, *The Robots of Dawn* (Doubleday, 1983), and *Robots and Empire* (Doubleday, 1985), the heroine, Gladia, is in love and the element of romance plays an important role in each story. (In fact, in *The Robots of Dawn*, there is a climactic romantic scene which plays a crucial part in the unraveling of the mystery.)

My story "The Ugly Little Boy" is a solid romance. To be sure, the romance is not between a man and a woman; it is between a woman and a child; but it's romance just the same, and a very touching one, too. I don't think I have to multiply examples any further. I am perfectly willing to admit that I probably couldn't write a straightforward "romance" as well as Ms. Prange can, but I can handle romance in a publishable manner.

Still, that's just because I'm a competent *writer*. As a competent *writer*, why, of course, I can handle romance, suspense, horror, dialogue, description, and all the other components of writing in a publishable manner. (I can also handle the various expository aspects of writing, and I do that whenever I write non-fiction, such as this editorial.)

But I am a *science fiction* writer, too, which means that I can also build believable self-consistent societies significantly different from our own, and that is a rare and (I believe) inborn talent that one doesn't have just by virtue of being a writer. It is that which makes us so special. ●

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LETTERS

My Love-Hate Relationship with SF:

I love science fiction novels. After twenty years of reading them, and even a few attempts at writing one, I can say, though, there are some things that bother me about them. And there are some things that bother me about their spin off films.

There have been enough "galactic empire" books written to fill a dump truck. It has always puzzled me how science fiction authors think that—in view of the extremely hard time very small, Earth-bound empires have had enduring—an empire spanning even two different star systems would be easy enough to put together and hold together—for centuries.

Technological advance tends to "level," in the old "leveler" sense of that word. There's plenty of opportunity, for example, with today's computer network, for snooping on others and even controlling them. But since, in free lands, anyway, it's easy to get your hands on a computer and learn all about it, there is a tendency toward a diffusion of knowledge. Knowledge, it has been observed, is power. Imagine a galaxy with even a few dozen planets settled by human beings. One individual—even one oligarchy—is going to control all that?

Sure, the argument can be made that when space flight is faster and technology even more powerful, it will render it easier to control vast amounts of territory and space. Maybe. But it will simultaneously make it easier to be independent, as well. My bet is that the settlement of terra-like planets will result pretty quickly in just as many independent new nations, given a few decades. And those independent new nations will be perfectly capable of defending themselves. They might even be in a better position. Consider: a habitable planet, with no intelligent life, is settled by human beings. Presto, they control the whole planet. When making political and military decisions they don't have to worry about stuff like a hostile superpower on the other side of their globe, what a United Nations might think, and that kind of thing. Within their own solar system, they probably will be able to do pretty much what they wish.

Another thing that has bothered me since Herbert's *Dune*: is the assumption that an aristocracy will come back into fashion—real fashion, as in actually ruling—based on any empirical evidence, or is it based on personal whim or pref-

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erence of the author—or is it based on the notion that the colonization of space much beyond this solar system can only be accomplished by an artistocratic leadership? The most effective, total colonization in history—that of the United States —was accomplished mostly through individual and voluntary-cooperative effort, although the military was shamefully involved as exterminator of Indians. (An unnecessary occurrence, by the way, not to speak of immoral and unethical, for purposes of effective settlement.) Those areas where aristocracies "colonized," mostly in South America and Asia, as well as Africa, fared much, much worse by comparison, and bitter political, social, and economic legacies still remain. There is, as well, the historic evidence of the superior efficiency in accomplishing settlement — or any other task—through free market processes as compared to any kind of "command" society. Aristocracy is certainly a "command" society in its purest and simplest form.

But I still love SF novels. Probably because SF novels, almost alone of all fiction today, create characters, heroic characters, that are bigger than life. Characters which inspire us, maybe to do and be more ourselves than we might have been otherwise. Another reason I love SF is because, despite what I consider the total improbability that there ever will be a "House Atreides" or anything like it—nor any dukes, counts, barons, and emperors—SF has no limits except the imagination and skill of the particular author. One need not confine the plot and story to one place, one continent, one world or galaxy, or even one dimension. Why, there's no confining it all.

It's true enough some authors use that lack of limits to create people who—given that the *technology* is possible—are still impossible.

But, isn't it all damn marvelous?

S. D. Yana Davis
2225-A Arlington Avenue
Birmingham, AL 35205

A Sumerian city-state would not have grasped, accepted, nor believed in the conceivability of a Roman Empire from which it was separated by a mere 2500 years of slow change. Given another 2500 years of rapid change, who knows where we'll be. Then, too, there are aristocrats and aristocrats. People like Lee Iacocca, Frank Sinatra, and Joan Collins are true American aristocrats. If you don't believe it watch the headwaiters smirk, and bob their heads, and dry-wash their hands. They don't do it for you and you.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. Asimov,

Recently I have been catching up on my back issues of your magazine, and particularly enjoyed a piece in the May 1980 issue of *IAsfm* entitled "Hot and Cold Running Waterfall," by Stephen Tall. I would certainly enjoy reading other stories by this author. How about it?

The quality of the magazine is one of the best things I like about *IAsfm*. Quality is something that requires just the right touch—you can read something that is so serious that it becomes boring, or you

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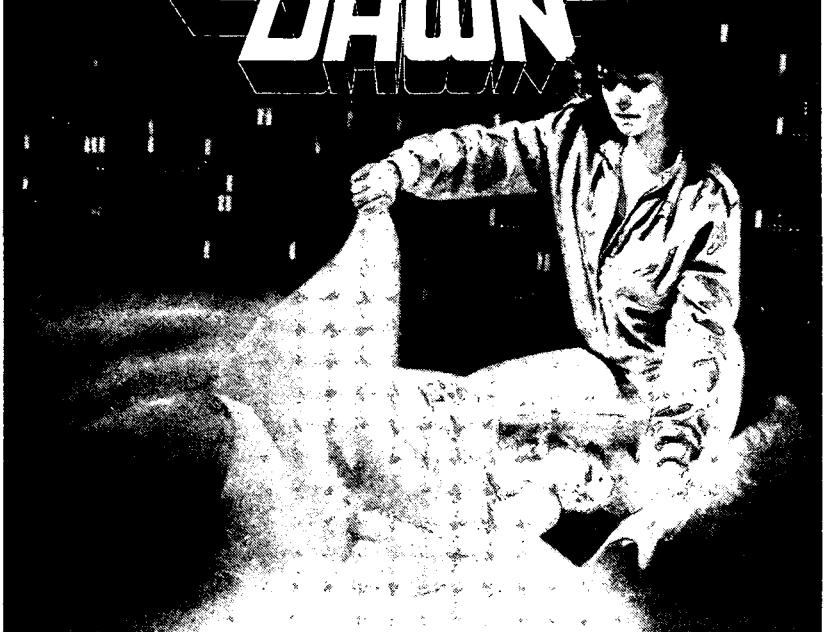

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can read something so silly (which is trying to be humorous) that it becomes outrageous. From my own personal experience, trying to walk the line between the two is like trying to walk a tightrope. (I just might submit one of my better efforts in the future.)

Thanks for such a fine magazine, and, as has been said many times before, keep up the good work!

Bill LaFleur
Lacey, WA

Alas, even science fiction writers are mortal. "Hot and Cold Running Waterfall" was Mr. Tall's last published story. A year after its publication on 15 June 1981, he died.
—Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. Asimov,

I wrote my very first letter to *IAsfm* just last week, but I find myself forced to write another now.

I have been scrounging through my friend's magazine collection and I ran across the first three issues of this magazine. Imagine my surprise when I found staring at me from the cover a strikingly handsome fellow: you! And on all three covers!

I'll bet there are a lot of people, like me, that wouldn't mind it at all if you could sneak onto a cover again sometime. How about it?

Sincerely yours,

Mary Doolittle
P.O. Box 1966
State University, AR 72467

"Strikingly handsome" is just the correct description, but you and I seem to be a minority of two in this matter. For a while afterward my face was included in the "o" of "Asimov's," but that grew smaller and finally disappeared to the applause of the nation. Oh, well, if you're ever in New York, let me know and I'll let you stare at me for a while.
—Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. Asimov,

I subscribed to your magazine because I want to prepare myself for professional writing, and because I like science fiction.

I liked your editorial about the unicorn, but I do not agree with you that the *New English Bible* (NEB) is the most accurate translation yet made. I believe the accuracy of the *New American Standard Bible* (NASB) is better.

As a student of New Testament Greek able to make authoritative translations, I have discovered that the NASB is superior to the NEB in its New Testament translation. I know Hebrew and Aramaic experts who have compared the NASB and NEB translations of the Tenach (the Old Testament). They say the NASB is a better translation than the NEB.

I enjoyed "Your Future as a Writer" in *Writer's Digest*, but I would love to debate with you about the evolution of *Homo sapiens*. We would have a marvelous time going round and round on that subject. You would be at a disadvantage since the evidences used to support the theory of evolution are more supportive of creation.

Jon A. Covey
Sepulveda, CA

I've never read the New American Standard Bible so I can't argue the point with you. However, if you

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think the evidences used to support the theory of evolution are more supportive of creation, I am unwilling to trust your judgment on anything.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Sirs:

The first thing I read in the November issue was the editorial, "Specialization," in which the Doctor defended and expanded upon his February editorial, and generally touted the research and special knowledge that good writers of science fiction must acquire in addition to the skills they share with other writers. It was my humble opinion that the case was a bit overstated but essentially accurate. The Doctor is *not* the *only* authority in this area, only the *leading* authority. I would say "one of" could I name another serious contender.

The last thing that I read in that issue was "Voice in the Dark" by Jack McDevitt, which is a good case-in-point. Mr. McDevitt failed to research his computer technology sufficiently and may have misrepresented the software industry as well. I do not believe it likely that anyone would design software that would do both the menu-driven processing and the memory-dump as he suggests. It can be done. It would not be difficult. It seems an unlikely combination.

I am better able to criticize his descrition of laser disk technology. Laser disks are a write-once medium. Once you have written on an area of disk then that area has been written on—period! You cannot erase the contents of the disk with the computer and you cannot write over an area of disk—thereby rendering that data irretriveable —without resorting to a major programming effort to by-pass the disk drive's normal functioning. It *is* possible to make the data difficult to retrieve with some simple manipulations but the suggested method fails even that. Also, the laser disk is about as sensitive to electro-magnetic disturbance as a vinyl record.

Was the story any good? Yes. There were other flaws in it (everyone's a critic) but it made a point that needed to be made, had a beginning, middle, and an end, had characters who were developed, and was reasonably entertaining. Does the flawed technology ruin the story? The story would be better were the technology not flawed —if only for those many of us who know. Did I enjoy the issue as a whole? It was in yesterday's mail and today's has not yet arrived: I think "Yes."

'til next month,

David Meyer
Boston, MA

Dear Dr. Asimov:

I am very pleased with the usual quality of stories that you bring to the reading public. There is, however, a complaint that I must make about the story "Voice in the Dark" by Jack McDevitt (Nov. '86).

Arithmetic! Such a simple thing to check, and so bothersome that it obviously wasn't checked, by the author or your editorial staff.

There are two problems in the story. The first is in Mr. McDevitt's use of "laser disks" to hold the 23.3

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million characters of the alien information. One laser disk at current technology holds 500 million characters. Even if the Write-Once-Read-Many-times version is used, they hold 200 million. Yet he says that 178 disks are needed. This suggests that he is only having them put about 130 thousand characters on each one. It seems obvious that Mr. McDevitt was thinking of standard floppy disks (I'll get back to this one) and just used the name "laser" to be snazzy.

The other arithmetic problem is in only having 23.3 million characters. One full orbital period, over sixty-four hours, at 41,279 baud produces 1,021,275,483 characters! Not a measly 23.3 million. These 1.02 billion characters will fit on only three laser disks.

If Mr. McDevitt had left the disks as "floppy disks" (I'm back), and reduced the baud rate to about 930, then the 23.3 million characters and the 178 disks make sense. A further indicator of floppies being used is the finish, where Rimford uses electromagnetics to scramble the information on the disks. This doesn't work on laser disks. It does on floppies.

There is some hope left in the story. The two medical disks are shielded in a metal cabinet. They may survive the electromagnetic vandalism and still have some useful information on them.

"Voice in the Dark" is a well written story despite these oversights. Perhaps a bit pessimistic of human nature and sanity, but not unreasonably so in light of current events.

Jesse Chisholm
Dubuque, Iowa

Sprague de Camp says "It does not pay a prophet to be too specific." I always add the corollary, that "It does not pay a science fiction writer to describe his technology too exactly." I wonder what Jack McDevitt has to say about this.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Sheila,

In response to the computer questions: I suspect Dr. Asimov is correct in suggesting it is safer not to get too deeply into the technological jungle when one is wearing sneakers. However, the system I had in mind—it is admittedly a few years down the road—is a hybrid operation: magnetic write, laser read. This would combine the flexibility of the floppy with the memory capacity of the current laser disk. This type of disc *would* be subject to scrambling by an electromagnetic device.

Jesse Chisholm is of course correct in noting that laser disks have a substantial storage capability, well beyond the material actually recorded in "Voice in the Dark." But the limiting factor in disk usage during the project described in the story was never storage capacity. It was the bureaucratic juxtaposition of security with easy availability of data, based on the logic of the divisions imposed by the alien transmission itself.

Sincerely,

Jack McDevitt
Brunswick, GA

Dear Dr. Asimov,

I don't know what Susan Palwick's story, "Elephant," was doing

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DAUGHTER OF THE EMPIRE

Raymond E. Feist and Janny Wurts

DOUBLEDAY

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in a science fiction magazine, but I'm glad it was there in your November 1986 issue.

I'd like to think that you and the other editors sat down at a big table, each with a copy of "Elephant" in front of you, and argued the merits of side-stepping the somewhat narrow definition of science fiction in order to publish Susan Palwick's story.

I'd like to think even further, that it did not take long for each of you to reach a unanimous decision, that, stretched to its widest boundaries, *IAsfm* could allow this work of art to slide in sideways.

"Elephant" lent a note of down-to-earth warmth and humanity to an out-of-this-world magazine. I would like to thank Susan Palwick (and, of course, the editors of *IAsfm*) for affording me the opportunity to read her highly personal insight into the human condition.

Sincerely,

James M. Lippincott
Philadelphia, RA

P.S. I do not mean to imply that Ms. Palwick's story was the only "work of art" that I have ever read in *IAsfm*. This is certainly not the case. This particular "work of art" was most remarkable.

We sometimes forget that psychology is one of the sciences, too. Even though my own penchant is for the physical sciences and if I were Gardner I might not have grasped "Elephant" and might not have accepted it—that just shows how much better off we are having me stay a figurehead while Gardner, with sweet Sheila's aid, does the real work.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Folks,

I just got the December 1986 issue of *Asimov's*. I haven't finished it yet, but I already know that Joe Haldeman's poem, "Machines of Loving Grace," said something to me that I could not answer except to say, "You're right, Joe." I haven't used a manual typewriter since I was about fourteen, I guess, or maybe thirteen. I've gone through some silly number of electric typewriters and have now put away the newest in favor of an ancient, almost obsolete, Xerox 820-1 computer. I can barely remember the satisfaction of hitting all the keys as fast as I could without jamming the type bars and the wonderful thunking sound that came from slapping the return lever to fling the carriage across the typewriter (and sometimes the typewriter across the desk). I can't say I miss the uneven lines of type my young fingers produced, and I certainly don't miss retyping papers and manuscripts four and five times to get clean copy to work from. I would miss the sense of having something solid and faithful to work with if I didn't have my Behemoth, with its project box cases and eight-inch floppy disks. People who own MacIntoshes and use three-inch disks (or whatever size they are) stare in amazement when I say "eight-inch floppies." Someday the Behemoth will drop dead from a disk drive that isn't made any more and I will have to replace him with a nice new shiny computer. If I'm lucky, that won't happen until I'm rich and famous and They've perfected the laser disk pc. Until then, I'll just relish being one of two people on the East Coast to

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use a pc that uses eight-inch floppy disks. (If there are more of us, please let me know!)

So, anyhow. Joe, thank you. I do like that poem.

While I'm here, let me say that there is at least one senior in my house who would starve to death if I didn't subscribe to this magazine. She comes in and trades me candy, books, old issues of my magazines, anything she can offer, to be allowed to take away the latest issue.

But really. I am truly delighted to see my magazines in my post office box. It gives me something to do besides what I'm supposed to be doing without making me feel as though I'm goofing off. I mean, a writer's supposed to keep up with the market, right?

I really want to finish reading December right now, but if I do, you folks will never have the chance to read my thesis, 'cause they'll throw me out of school.

A belated welcome to Gardner, and thanks to the whole crew for making my not-thesis, not-other-schoolwork time so wonderful. Sometimes I read a story that makes me just want to stop right there and not contaminate the afterthought—the thinking afterward — with the next story and not make the next story less impressive by making it follow one that makes me want to stop. . . .

Peace and Clear Skies,

Morgan S. Brilliant
Great Barrington, MA

I remember reading a poem in which someone tries to inflict curses under which the intended victim

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remains staunch and unmoved. Then, finally, the line comes "I wish upon you the curse of remembering—" and the intended victim waits for no details but gives in at once. That curse was inflicted on me at birth. I remember the keys jamming; I remember the carriage pushing the typewriter to the left; I remember the little screws breaking: I remember the hard, hard, hard, hard push against the keys, hour after hour. And I turn back to my humming Selectric, and my flickering word processor with such relief.

—Isaac Asimov

Announcements:

Clarion Writers Workshop celebrates its twentieth anniversary this year. The workshop, which Robin Scott Wilson started at Clarion College in Pennsylvania, has produced many of the current names in science fiction. George Alec Effinger, Vonda McIntyre, Octavia Butler, Kim Stanley Robinson, and Bruce Sterling were all Clarion graduates.

This year's instructors include Clarion graduate **Lucius Shepard** (Green Eyes), **Karen Joy Fowler** (Artificial Things), **Suzy McKee Charnas** (Dorthea Dreams), **Algis Budrys, Damon Knight,** *and* **Kate Wilhelm.**

The workshop runs from June 21 to August 1 at Michigan State University. Tuition, room, and board for out-of-state participants will be approximately $1,575. For in-state participants, those costs will come to $1,100. For more information and an application, write: David E. Wright, Director, Clarion '87, Lymann Briggs School, Michigan State University, East Lansing, MI 48824.

SEATTLE, *Washington —The fourth annual Clarion West science fiction and fantasy writing workshop will be held at Seattle Central Community College June 21 - August 1, 1987, with writers-in-residence* **Edward Bryant, Octavia E. Butler, Ursula K. Le Guin, Connie Willis, Shawna McCarthy,** *and* **Samuel R. Delany.**

Approximately twenty students will be selected from the applicants. Applications will be considered until May 15, 1987 at a cost of $975 (college credit and lodging costs extra); limited scholarships are available. Submit twenty to thirty pages of manuscript (one to two short stories or a novel portion with outline), together with a $50 refundable deposit payable to Clarion West, and a cover letter containing background and reasons for wanting to attend Clarion West. Send to: Clarion West, P.O. Box 12064, Seattle, WA 98102. For further information, call Seattle Central Community College (Tu-F 8:30-4:30) at (206) 587-5473.

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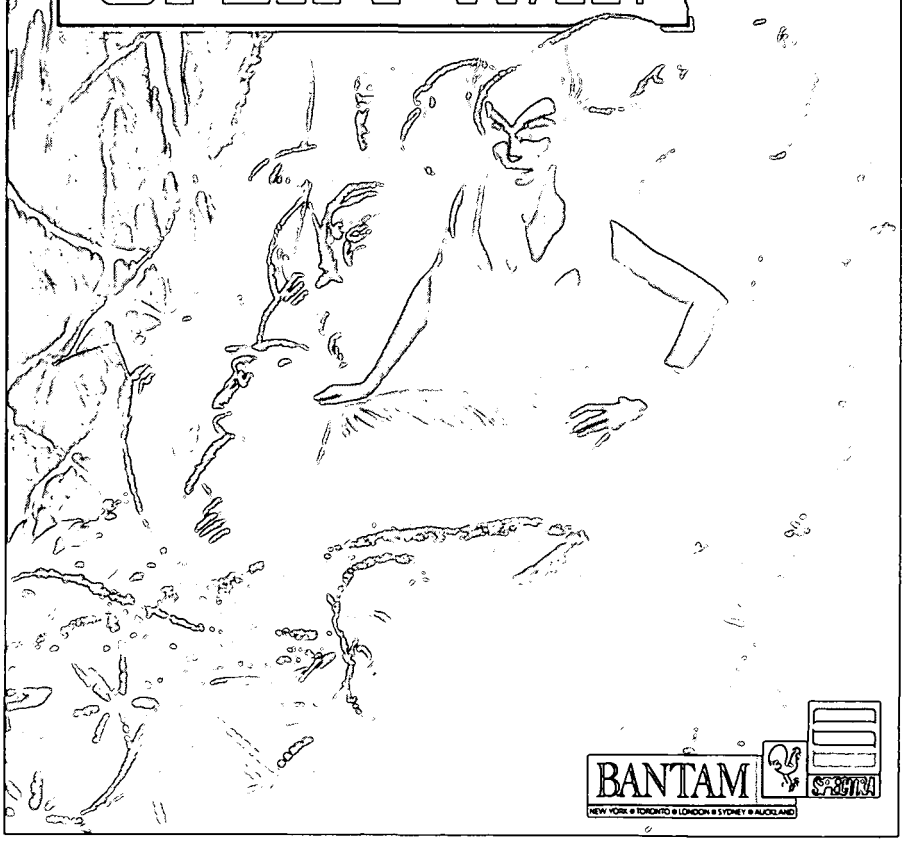

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GAMING

by Matthew J. Costello

Confession time.

I'm not really that great a game player. And my recent experiences with the new Star Trek Computer Game from Simon & Schuster, *The Promethean Prophecy* (Simon & Schuster Software, Gulf and Western Building, 1 Gulf and Western Plaza, New York, NY 10023; $32.95) will help illustrate that point.

You see, many of the computer games sent to reviewers come with a handy "tip sheet"—one page of idiot instructions to guide the reviewer through the game. The reviewer gets to experience most of the game's high points, and then gets to write an article sounding like some kind of Zen Master from the land of microchips.

And I guess there's a good enough reason for the sheets. I mean, when you review dozens of computer adventure games, you simply can't devote the thirty-plus hours often required to make headway.

So, now we come to *The Promethean Prophecy*, Simon & Schuster's follow up to its widely-acclaimed *Kobayashi Alternative*. The first sequence in the game had me, as Captain Kirk, dealing with an attack by a Romulan Bird of Prey. The Romulan captain appeared on my view screen, said that this attack was to avenge his brother's death, and then proceeded to hack away at the *Enterprise*. Of course, any star captain worth his salt would know what to do. I ordered Sulu to fire photon torpedoes, and I sat back to wait for the Romulan to vanish. And that's when Mr. Spock chimed in with the observation that, from all analyses, the Bird of Prey wasn't there. And yet it kept on gleefully blowing my ship apart.

It wasn't too many moves later before my ship was gone and I was being cheerfully offered the opportunity to play again. And then once more I lost my ship, feeling even more inadequate with each play.

And, horror of horrors, there was no tip sheet.

So, there was only one thing to do. Yes, I called Simon & Schuster and spoke directly to the editor of the game program. I introduced myself, said a few words about my computer acting "funny" lately and how I couldn't spend *that much* time trying to figure out the game, so could she give me a few pointers.

Naturally, the answer proved relatively simple. And, with more time, I'm sure I could have figured it out by myself.

(continued on page 97)

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JO CLAYTON

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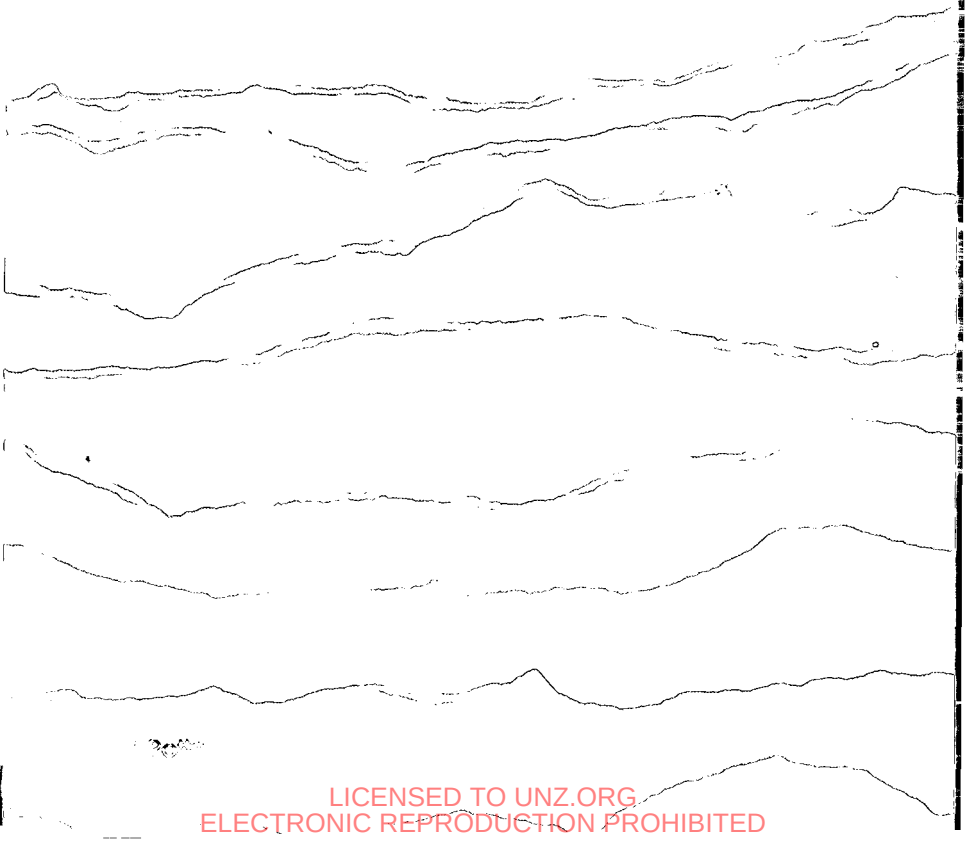
YANQUI DOODLE

by James Tiptree, Jr.

The author last appeared in these pages with "Collision" (May 1986)—an adventurous space romp in the far distant future. Now she returns with a tale of a future disturbingly closer to home. A word of warning: "Yanqui Doodle" is a war story and it contains some very violent scenes which may be disquieting to some.



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Of course they have to visit a hospital. To show they care. But which hospital? Not a big base hospital, but not a front-line station either—Congressional Armed Service Committee members are too precious to go where real iron is flying. Not to mention the value of the half-dozen generals escorting the fact-finding tour of the Bodéguan front.

A perfect hospital is found. The town of San Izquierda, just inside the Bodéguan border, has finally been liberated by American troops after the Libras had nibbled at it several times, and each time been run out by the Guévaristas. After the sixth loss the GIs were sent in to take it conclusively—what was left of it. Now the front has rolled forward twenty-five or fifty kilometers—depending on whose maps you used—and a big mansion formerly owned by one of the dictator's pals has been converted into an Intermediate Rehab Unit. The patients are a mix of GIs who would go back on duty, with some whose condition was bad enough to invalid them back to base, or even home.

So now the cavalcade is driving toward San Izzy, trying to make time. This is the last event of the Senators' day, and they've been delayed at Hona Base. There was an obstacle course demonstration by U.S. field instructors, and a parade of Libra troops in training, and speeches. That caused the trouble; even General Sternhagen had been moved to say more than a few words.

Senator Biller, the ranking Committee member, sits in the rear of the stretch Mercedes with two American flags on the fenders. Behind him come two new '98 Caddies with the rest of the Committee and some more generals, similarly beflagged. All the other escort vehicles bear twin flags, one American, the other the official Libra flag, which had been somewhat hastily designed and is not everywhere recognized with confidence.

The Senator sits between General Schehl and the interpreter. She is a neat and sultry-looking young lady, whose grasp of such fundamental phrases as "founding fathers" is, Senator Biller feels, a trifle shaky. He is wishing he could give her a short course in American—er, United States—history.

He is also musing on the Libra troops he had spoken with after their parade. The Freedom Fighters. The average Freedom Fighter had a distressing tendency to look like a fifteen-year-old Hispanic delinquent embracing an M-30.

"What did the Guévaristas do to you?" he had asked one youth. "Why are you here?"

The youth looks at the ground, then into space. "Guéyas very bad," he says to the interpreter, who amplifies, "Much oppression."

Biller persists. "What did they do to you? How did they oppress you?"

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The boy says something cryptic. "They wanted to recruit him for the Army," the interpreter explains.

"But you're in the Army now," Biller says against his better judgment.

"Gué army very bad!" The interpreter smiles ravishingly. "Here is more better."

Looking around at Hona's substantial barracks, the lad's new uniform and boots, the slight but perceptible bulge under his belt, Senator Biller can believe it.

The boy adds something, scuffing his toe.

"Only he is worried about his Mama," the interpreter goes on. This is something Biller can relate to. He pats the boy's shoulder comfortingly and smiles.

"He is afraid she will sell his motorcycle," the interpreter finishes.

Several Libras are listening to the exchange. Senator Biller looks round at their young faces and tells them what fine young men they are, what a good thing they are doing evicting Marxist-Leninism and saving their country for Democracy—all of which the interpreter seems to shorten unduly.

Then there is a bark, and all come smartly to attention, faces blank. The senator moves on.

Meanwhile his colleagues, some of whom could speak Spanish, were likewise mingling with the troops, forming invaluable first-hand impressions of the state of the minds and hearts of the people to whose aid their country had sent her armed might and the blood of her sons. Afterwards Senator Moverman exclaimed, "Fine brave boys! To think they'd be fighting Soviet gunships bare-handed if we hadn't sent them aid!"

Another legislator inquired as to whether they had captured many Cubans. A look of intense wariness came over his informants' faces. "Fidelistas very bad. Very bad soldier." It turned out that they meant "very dangerous."

"Where are they? Can we see some of the Cubans you captured?"

There was a quick confab, and somebody said "Fidelisto!" and laughed in a private way that gave Senator Biller grave qualms about the Geneva Conventions. A traitorous thought crossed his mind, about other boymen in other uniforms, sent abroad to die for Soviet geopolitik. He shrugged it away. War is evil. Lying down under communist tyranny is worse.

It was at this point that old Senator Longmast had indicated his desire to address the assembled Libra and U.S. troops, and got into his brief explanation of What They Were Fighting For that so terminally delayed them. When he was reminded that they had a hospital to visit, he said "We owe it to them," and went on.

Now the party is trying to make up lost time on the San Izquierda

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road, which features a plethora of potholes and other obstacles. At the moment they have come onto a herd of scraggly cattle trapped between the steep banks of the mountain road.

The cars stop, the party gets out to stretch. Below them is a superb view of San Izquierda in the evening sun, nestled around its almost-intact cathedral. Shadowy mountain ridges, forested by pines, stretch away on either hand. Senator Biller reaches for his camera, as do others.

They are at a small crossroad. On the other road a rusty country bus has also stopped, is letting out people. The scene is very peaceful. Tropical birds are making exotic evening sounds. There is only the far-off rumble of heavy trucks on another road; a convoy, probably.

Beside the Senator there looms up what seems to be a self-propelled great load of sticks. It turns out to be on the head of a small old woman. Biller reflects that only weeks ago she and the town had been under the iron boots of the Guévaristas. He catches her curious eye on him and grins broadly, saying "Libertad!"

"Si! Si!" Her face lights up with a toothy grin. Life is good; only that morning she had sold her twelve-year-old daughter to three *Yanquis* for pesos four hundred, about twenty dollars.

Senator Biller steels himself against the impulse to tell his driver to help her with her load. (They're used to it, this is the way they live.) He turns to his snapshots of the town below.

Ahead, the cattle are dispersing. The party is getting back into their cars. On the side road the bus has started up, too.

"See—Hospital!" the driver throws back over his shoulder, waving at a large building set in a garden just in view several kilometers ahead and below.

In that same hospital, Pfc Donald Still had come back to life some two weeks before. The last thing he remembered was hearing his patrol leader yell and finding himself falling with an unbelievable pain on the inside of his thigh. He also remembered thinking that the path behind the ridge they were following was a natural site for mines, but he was too exhilarated to object. They were in hot pursuit of a bunch of Gués who were running and dodging just behind the spine of the ridge. The trees cleared out ahead. Don popped another BZ, looking forward to getting himself some good bursts.

Now he was flat on his back, feeling terrible, with a heavy wrapped-up leg. Steel rails on the bed. Above him afternoon sun filtered through ornate windows in a high dome. Mostly silence all around, no shots, no footsteps running. This was no battle-aid station. The choppers must have carried them all the way back to wherever this was. He felt that

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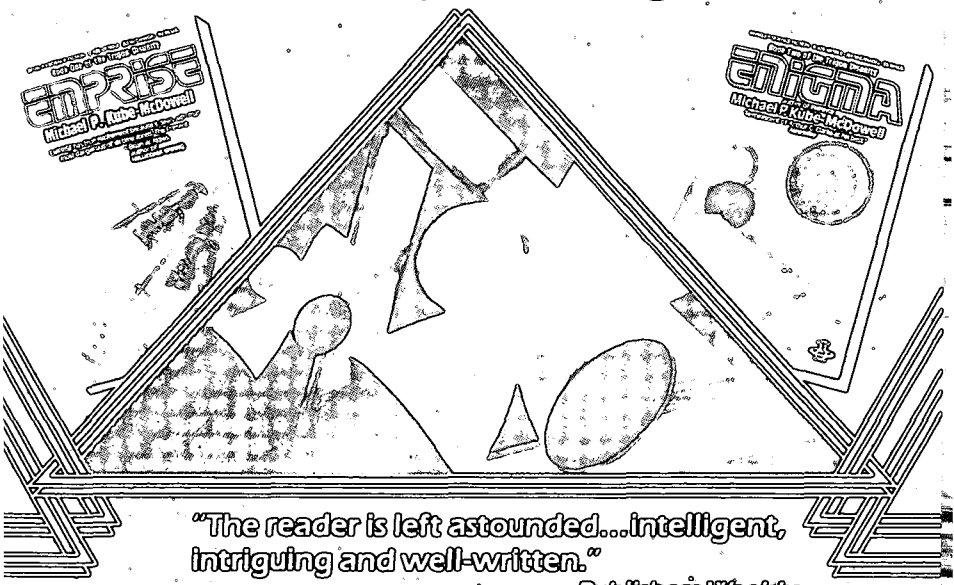
by **Michael P. Kube-McDowell**

Author of *Emprise* and *Enigma*



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a lot of time had passed here: dreams of struggles, dreams of himself shouting.

His mouth and eyes were painfully dry, his head hurt, he felt weak and fluttery inside, and his leg ached horribly. Automatically he reached for a Maintenance pill. But his pill kit wasn't there. He was in hospital pjs, no pockets, no pills, nada.

"Hey! Hello!"

A dizzyingly beautiful girl's face swam in front of him. No, on second look she wasn't so gorgeous, only cute and very clean.

"Where am I? What's with my leg?"

She produced a clipboard. "You're in San Izquierda Intermediate Rehab Fifteen. Your leg is okay, you'll be walking tomorrow when the cast comes off. You were lucky, you just lost a lot of blood." She smiled meaningfully. "*Very* lucky."

"I need an M."

"Oh-oh." She frowned. "Wel-l-l. Tomorrow you start detox."

"But this is still today!" He tried to smile over sudden panic.

"Wel-l-l. You're just making it harder for yourself."

"But it's today. You said. *Please.*"

Without saying anything she turned away and came back with the precious yellow tab. He managed to clutch it and dry-swallowed. She tut-tutted at him.

"We've got to stop that pill-seeking behavior, soldier," she said cutely.

In spite of himself he grinned at her, or rather at the blessed tide of relief that would come through his veins in a minute.

"Make the most of it, soldier," she told him and went away.

He loathed people who called him "soldier" but he wasn't about to antagonize his supply. The M was working already, he could feel the first faint glow, the all-rightness, stealing over him. Without Ms, who could make this war? Nobody he knew of.

"Hey, what happened to the others? To my unit?" He asked when she passed by later. "Jack Errin, Benjy?"

"Your friends? I'm afraid I don't know. You were brought in alone. I did hear you were an only survivor. I'm afraid your friends were casualties, soldier. Or maybe they weren't badly hurt."

Friends, he thought. Yes, he'd liked Jack in a far-off sort of way, and Benjy was a good guy. But didn't she know that in this war you don't have pals? When you're on Ms you don't need 'em, when you're on BZs you don't remember the word.

"What do you mean about detox tomorrow? What are they going to do to me?"

"Because you're going home, soldier. *Home*—I told you you were lucky. Why do you think you're in an Intermediate Unit?"

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He had no idea.

"Because we can't let you boys go home full of that awful stuff, can we? So you have to get two–three weeks of detox. It won't be so bad. Think about going home."

He lay back, his head spinning. Through his body the gentle glow of the M was taking away all worries. Tomorrow was a long way off.

But think about going home? He didn't particularly want to. Home wasn't much since Geri had split. But to tell the truth he could hardly remember her. It had been one of those draft-notice marriages anyway, and so far as he knew he hadn't left a child. Her letters had been short and almost illegible, starting with a hot sort of personal pornography, and ending last fall with the "I guess we better think this all over" one. She'd been staying with his folks in San Diego. Not much of a life for her. He guessed she was really divorcing his mother. He chuckled to himself.

So now where should he go? Back to San D. first, then he'd see. Something would turn up. No point in worrying now. In fact, he couldn't worry if he tried.

He remembered the week they had first issued the Ms. What a change. All the guys who were muttering about going AWOL just quit. They'd often wondered what was in them. Not cocaine, nothing he'd ever heard of. Miracles of modern science.

No, wait—the first things they issued were the BZs. He'd been given some specially, when someone had noticed him firing his M-18 in the air instead of at the Gués in front of them. What the hell, a lot of the others were doing that, too. The boys they killed had been so young, and they shot so badly. He'd expected the Commie Gués to be ten feet high and mean. Not baby-faced twelve-year olds. Of course those same twelve-year olds had been laying mines that blew unlucky grunts apart, but . . . but . . . looking straight at one and blowing his guts out was somehow different. They ran away fast enough, wasn't that what counted?

But the Army saw things differently. Kill! Kill! His training . . . so he found himself being given some red capsules and instructed to take one when he was in a shooting situation. BZs . . . Battle Zones . . . they had removed all his reservations about blowing anybody away, made it exhilarating. In fact, they had removed all his reservations about anything. But luckily your memory of what you'd done behind BZs wasn't too good. They had swept through several little hamlets, putting the flamers to it all, and there were flash-memories of other things. Patch-views of female flesh, lots of screaming, and one that bothered him a lot—he didn't want to think about that now.

So then had come the green Sleeper tabs, and after that there weren't

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any more dreams. Trouble was, men started nodding over their rifles on patrol. So then there was the general issue of Ms For Maintenance. It made an ideal combo.

But detox? Detox before going home? Nobody had said a word to them about that. He'd always assumed they had some other magic potion, that there'd be some kind of gentle end. Well, it would all be okay. It had to, he thought, drifting off. Nobody'd do anything so brutal.

He woke up with somebody pushing a tray at him. "Soft diet."

Trying to eat the stuff he didn't feel so good. The M was wearing off. Probably they hadn't given him enough while he'd been here, his blood levels were low.

A different nurse was on duty, an older, dark-haired woman. She brought him an M when asked, without comment.

"You're starting detox tomorrow, you know," she told him. But she seemed nicer, more like she was worried for him.

"What's so big about that? Is it bad?"

"Well-l-l . . . you've been on this stuff how long? A year?"

"Around that."

"We're just starting to get long-timers like you."

"What happens?" he persisted.

She frowned. "Detoxification is always hard. You have to get your body making the chemicals again itself. The only way is to go cold; tapering off is like cutting a dog's tail off an inch at a time to be kind. But some people take it like a breeze. Most do. Hold the thought."

He wasn't worried. But still he wondered. "I thought they'd have something for us. I mean, they put us on it."

"You mean you were ordered to take the stuff?"

"Oh, no . . . but strongly suggested. Because . . . because there were things . . . ." He wanted to stop talking and enjoy the M's good feeling.

"Well, there is Slobactin. That helps. You'll be given some."

"Thank you," he said dreamily. She went away.

He lay back, looking vaguely around. The room seemed to have been part of a mansion—a ballroom, maybe. Only a few other beds were in here—too far spaced to talk. A bed was rolled in with a lot of fuss going on around it—a new arrival fresh from the operating room, he made out. This was some kind of way-station. By craning his head he could see metal-grilled doorways, apparently leading into corridors the Army had built on. Two muscular-looking male techs or orderlies sat behind desks, keeping an eye on things. It was very peaceful; the first time in a long time he had heard no firing.

Bedtime came, and the cute little blonde nurse came in to douse the lights and distribute pills. The yellow-and-pink cap she gave him was all wrong.

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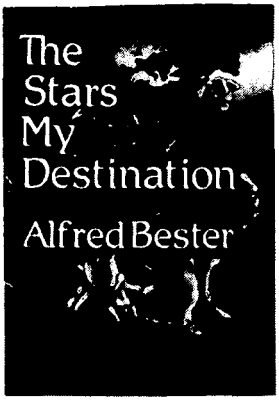

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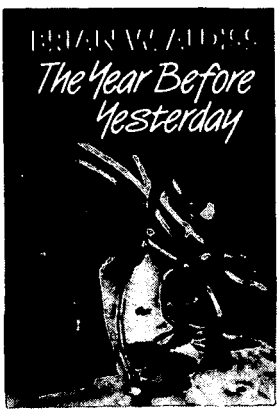

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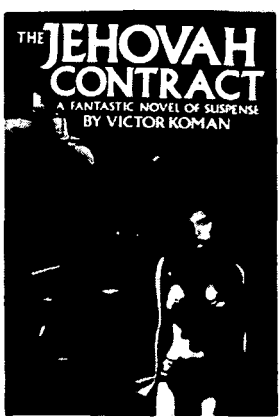

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"Nurse, I want my Army sleep pill. My ND." ND was for No Dreams.

"This is just as effective," she said serenely.

He doubted it strongly. "I want my regular ND. I'm entitled to it, it's still today."

"You're not entitled to any particular medication, soldier. You're entitled to have us make you well, that's what we're doing."

Her voice had a nasty edge, her smile was pure plastic.

"But it's not fair! The NDs are for—for special reasons." He couldn't tell her about the dreams. —Please. Can I have mine tonight? It's still today."

"You have your sleeping pill. Now calm down and go to sleep, you're disturbing the other patients."

"I'll keep everybody awake if you don't give me the right one!"

"Don't try it, soldier." She smiled toward the grille where the two big orderlies were watching him alertly. She went away.

He lay back, fuming. He'd meant that the dreams made him yell. Well, they'd find out.

"You get on *her* shit list, you dead," said the soldier in the next bed, separated from him by a tiled plant-stand.

"But she said—"

"You dead," the man repeated.

To his surprise, he did drift off, and dreamt only innocuous fantasies about his old dog.

He woke in the night, feeling a knife grinding him under his ribs. His old ulcer pain. He'd almost forgotten, he hadn't had that since his first ND-tab. And there was another trouble, an itch under his leg-cast. A roach or something must have somehow got under it and was struggling about. He banged at it futilely, and finally called.

Miss Plastic approached with a flashlight.

"Shshsh! What is it, soldier?"

"My ulcer hurts. I need some antacid."

She made a note on the clipboard. "I'll tell the doctor about it. Maybe he'll prescribe you some in the morning."

"In the morning? Christ, I need it right now, I feel like my stomach's boring through.

"Sorry, I can't prescribe medication. But I'll have the doctor look at you first thing, I promise." Cutie-doll smile.

"But antacid isn't a prescription drug, a medication! Christ, you can buy Maalox or Mylanta over the counter by the gallon. You must have some here. I *hurt.*"

"Anything other than your meals is a medication, soldier." She turned the flash off.

"Wait! Do you mean this shit?"

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"Don't swear at me."

"Well, wait one minute—there's bugs under my bandage. A bug. I can feel it crawling around."

Expertly she slipped back the sheet and explored the top of the cast with the light.

"No bugs. You calm down, the bugs will go away."

"But I can feel them! They itch! Can't you at least cut that stuff so I can scratch? You said it comes off tomorrow." No use, he could see that. "Isn't there something you could squirt under it? Some bug killer?" He asked weakly.

"Sorry, soldier. There are no insects, nothing, under that bandage. It's all in your head. Now, are we going to be good and go to sleep—or are you going to cause trouble? There are men here a lot sicker than you are, you know."

He looked up at her in the dim light, living proof that a cute girl five feet three inches high could be a monster.

"If you'd give me my ND I could sleep. It's not yet tomorrow!" His voice was high with anguish. She didn't reply, just clicked the flash off and went away.

He saw her checking the inhabitants of the other beds on her way out. Two men came awake at this, screamed briefly and thrashed about. Doesn't she know being wakened like that could be bad news in the combat zone, doesn't she know *anything?*

"Take it easy, soldier," he heard her say. Then she was gone.

He lay back and felt the supposedly non-existent bugs scratching like mad. One bastard's legs were in the tender place back of his knee. Goddamn. He made a determined effort to break the cast on the bedrails, got nowhere. Then he recalled something.

In a story he'd read, "insects" like this were a feature of going off drugs cold turkey. Victims were driven crazy, tore themselves bloody. The dopers' DTs. Was *this* what detoxification was going to be like? Oh, Christ, oh Christ.

He tried to relax, but there was no more possibility of sleep. And his ulcer was really hurting now, gnawing deep. Going without antacids could be dangerous, his old doc had said. Your stomach could perforate. He almost hoped his would, that would be a lesson for Miss Plastic. Medications! . . . God, he could see the inside of a US drugstore, all those good things laid out ready to your hand. Mylanta, Maalox, Alternagel, Tums—in his civilian days he'd been a good customer for all that. But the ND-tabs had stopped the pain. He'd have to get hold of more the minute he was turned loose. But what if they only issued them in the combat zone? Well, he'd get back there by hook or crook. Back to combat? Why not? If he was comfortable and could sleep there. How long would

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this damn detox take? Two, three weeks had they said? Could he endure it?

He rolled, rolled, tossed, trying to find a position where the pain was better and the bugs were quieter.... Some time toward morning he must have lost consciousness.

Detox started officially right after breakfast, when two strange orderlies descended on his bed, checked the rails, and starting rolling him toward one of the closed-off corridors. He'd been enjoying a nap at last, almost didn't wake up in time to size up his surroundings. As they relocked the grille he sat up and saw that he was in a wing the Army must have added on—plain plywood walls, low ceilings, all the way down, with doors opening off each side, to a blank wall at the far end. First came a second grille, strong steelwork, and polished in the middle as though hundreds of hands had gripped it. As they went through, he saw that the first door bore a hand-lettered sign: Quiet Room. The door had a small wire-reinforced glass window in it. And there was sound coming from it—a faint, pallid mewling or keening, like an animal far away. Then they were passing closed, featureless doors, 205, 207. At 209 the orderlies stopped, opened up and pushed him in.

Room 209 was about four meters square, with a screened, barred, frosted window. There was a bed already in it. The orderlies wrestled it around to take out.

Don said, "They told me I was going to walk today. They're supposed to take the cast off. Where's the doctor?"

"Don't know anything about that," one of them grunted, opening the door.

He started to panic. It seemed to him that once he was shut in here they would just forget him, let him starve and die, immobilized in the heavy cast.

"Where's a *doctor?* Would you tell them I need a doctor? I have ulcers, see," he added idiotically to their backs as they went out. The door closed.

At that he dragged himself up and by tremendous effort managed to get one leg over the guard-rails. Then he saw that the reason the cast was so immovable was that somebody had strapped it to the bed-rails, top and bottom. Must have been done when he dozed off. By straining to his limit he got the top buckle undone, but no way could he reach his ankle. Panting, he lay back. His hands were shaking like leaves in a wind.

"I'm not functioning," he thought. God how he needed an M. Was it possible that only ten days ago he had been a competent combatant, leaping up mountainsides?

He looked around. The room contained a straight chair, a small set of drawers on wheels, and a lidless toilet. No means of calling for help.

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That gave him an idea. Legitimate need.

He called tentatively, "Nurse!" No response, nothing. There was nobody out there. He raised his voice as loud as he could. "Nurse! Nurse! Nurse! *Help!*"

Almost instantly there were footsteps and the door opened. Miss Plastic.

"Nurse, I have to go to the can. Why isn't this cast off? You said I'd walk today. Where's the doctor? Does he know about my ulcer?"

She stared at him unsmiling. "We don't holler like that, soldier. It upsets other patients. You have to think of the others here."

"Well, how can I get help?"

"Someone looks in every fifteen minutes, around the clock. You can tell them what you need."

They went through the bedpan routine; she restrapped the buckle he'd opened and departed.

The morning dragged on. As she'd said, every quarter-hour the door opened and a face looked in. Often it was the dark-haired nurse, but he didn't bother her except to ask once if the cast would really be removed. "Yes. Soon, now. Doctor is making rounds."

The invisible insects had quieted down to where he could forget them, but in their place came a growing horde of aches and discomforts, everywhere. Bruises he dimly remembered from combat time hurt. Was all this what the Ms had been hiding from him? He groaned, trying to get comfortable. Did they even *have* a doctor in this crazy place?

At noon came the doctor, and with him Miss Plastic, carrying his lunch. She put the tray down on the bureau, out of his reach. The doctor was old, about Don's father's age. He was a grunter. He tackled the cast with an electric saw. Miss Plastic kept having to hand him things; it did Don good to see her obeying orders, sweet as peaches.

"You were very lucky, son, (grunt) very lucky. Hm'm. I think I'll take these stitches out now, but (grunt) no walking for three days, hear?"

"I can get to the toilet, can't I?"

"Hm'm'm. Very well, yes, to the toilet—but *only* there and back, understand? Mm'm. Meals in bed."

"Yes sir."

"And nurse, you keep an eye on him to see he stays put."

"We always do, sir."

"That's right (grunt). We put a pin in that bone, son, so you won't have a short leg. We don't want it wiggling around (grunt), we want it to heal tight. Keep it just as quiet as you can."

"Yes sir."

"M'm'm . . . Say, that looks good. Mind if I steal a bite?"

Without waiting for a reply the doctor plucked a small something off

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the tray, nodded, and went out. As they were leaving, Don called, "Nurse, I can't reach my lunch."

"Someone will be right in."

He lay and watched it getting cold. Food here was godawful enough when hot. In desperation, he crawled up on his good knee and then got that leg to the ground and leaned just far enough to grab the tray and pull it across himself as he collapsed. God, he was weak!

Just as he got settled the door opened and a strange red-headed nurse came in.

"My, we *are* impatient, aren't we?"

"I didn't step on the leg," he said defensively.

"Good." She looked at him seriously. "You'll have to live the rest of your life with whatever you do to yourself now. The doctor went to a lot of trouble. Follow his orders."

Somehow this got through to him. The nurse was someone in authority, he felt. He realized he'd been acting childishly. Long ago he'd been known for his patience and good temper. What had happened to him? Was all this the drugs? Or the effect of being without them? He no longer felt at all hungry, now that he'd gotten the tray. In fact he felt sick. And he was trembling and sweating.

"Nurse, I feel pretty terrible. They said you had something that helps. May I have some? Something bactin, I think."

"Slobactin. Yes, you'll be getting some with your regular medication."

"And I forgot to tell the doctor, I have ulcers. They've been acting up. Can I have some antacid?"

She made a note on her clipboard. "Yes, I'll tell the doctor as soon as he comes off rounds."

She was straightening his bedclothes. As she patted the under-sheet she suddenly frowned disapprovingly, but said nothing more before departing.

He fell into a sweaty sleep, forgetting his lunch, from which he was wakened by a man saying "Roll. Roll over here."

"Huh?"

It was one of the two big orderlies. He was dumping something into the bed, something heavy that felt both cold and warm.

"Roll over to the edge so I can spread this."

Groggily he complied, finally made out that the man was working a rubber sheet onto the mattress under the regular sheet. When he rolled back the bed felt clammy and hard on his bruises.

As the man left, Don began to feel scared. Did these precautions mean that he was going to be sick in some ghastly uncontrolled way? Well, he was starting to feel much more nauseated. And, goddamn, nothing to york into here, except the untouched lunch tray with its weak white

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plastic flatware. The orderly had put it back on top of him. He hoped it wouldn't come to that, tried deep breathing that hurt his ribs.

At the next door check he asked for a sick-basin, and to have the tray taken away. It was little Miss Plastic. She checked the uneaten food.

"It's starting, eh, soldier? You're slow—you must have been on that stuff a long time."

"A year."

"My, my . . . Soldier, how *could* you do that to your body?"

How could he begin to tell her, assuming she really wanted to know? Instead he asked her a question.

"Nurse, have you ever had ulcers?"

She laughed. Then she said with a smug little lift of her chin. "I've never used a day of sick-leave in my life." The implication was strong: those people who got sick did it to themselves.

"Try it sometime," he said through suddenly chattering teeth.

"No thanks!" Merrily she exited, taking the tray but forgetting his basin.

That afternoon was bad. The itching started again, and he scratched his arms bloody. Miss Plastic caught the blood on the sheet, looked at his nails, and clucked. "Marie hasn't been here."

Shortly an orderly came in, leading a small mestiza girl in a pink smock.

"Manicure time."

The girl grabbed his hand in a surprisingly firm small grip, and was already cutting. Cutting right down to the quick, he saw. When he protested, the man came and stood over him. "Routine procedure, fella." Don subsided, and the orderly produced a movie magazine and sat in the chair. The cutting went quickly; Don realized he would be helpless to ease himself, and tried to save out one finger. "No, no!" Marie said.

"Yes! Leave it, please."

The orderly put down his magazine and loomed over him again. "I said it's routine procedure. She does them all. Every one . . . You want to make trouble, fella?"

Looking up at him, Don decided he didn't. The girl finished with a filing job, and then, to his amazement, pulled back the sheet and tackled his toenails with a dog-clipper.

"Oh, no!"

"Oh, yes!" she said mockingly. The orderly watched impassively as she began, then returned to his gaudy magazine. "You could infect yourself, fella," he observed.

When the job was finished Don felt like a declawed cat, or a defanged wolf. God, the lengths they went to to render him helpless!

And more. Just after they left, Miss Plastic came in with a mestizo

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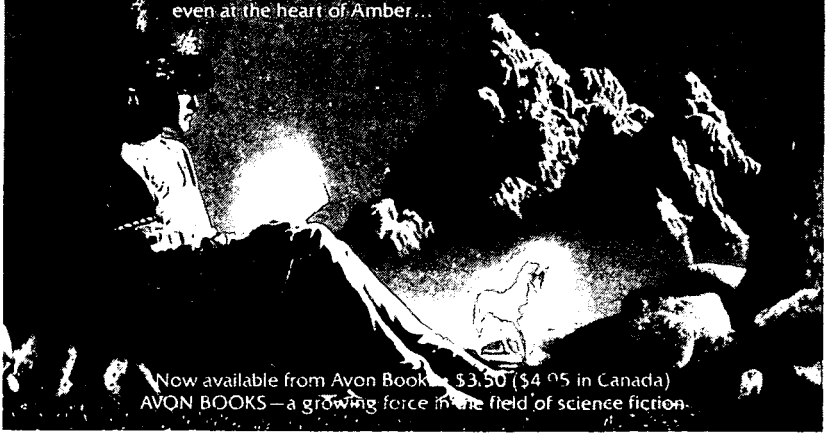

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porter carrying what Don recognized with wonder as his duffelbag from main camp. One of the Army's eerie efficiencies. The duffel was plonked down and the little nurse swiftly opened it and started to unpack it onto the floor. Searching. His hunting knife went first into a big plastic bag she had. Then his cigarettes, and then she opened his shaving roll.

"You can keep these." She pulled out toothpaste and brush, and then resealed the kit and dumped it into her bag.

"Hey, are you going to take that away? I need those things."

"No metal or glass," she said firmly. "No liquids. And no heavy plastic."

Don was a fairly neat packer; he had put a clean uniform and his fresh laundry into plastic bags. Those got dumped, and the bags confiscated.

"Why those?"

"No bags. Patients have been known to try to do themselves harm."

"With a *baggie?*"

She didn't answer. He guessed she meant you could smother yourself with one. Ugh—what a way to go. A tremor of fear ran over him. Did people here really get that desperate?

"That reminds me—where's my watch?"

"At the desk. With your dog-tags. You get them back when you leave."

He felt nakeder than ever, but nausea was rising in him again and he couldn't protest. This time she brought him a basin, and watched him as he retched up liquid. Then she crammed his remaining stuff back into the eviscerated duffel, zipped it up and left with her bag of booty.

He lay back, sweating and shaking. There was a peculiar sourceless pain in his legs; no position eased it. The itching started again, and rubbing with his denuded fingers only made it worse. Finally in desperation he managed to get out of bed and grab his toothbrush from the window sill. Scratching with that gave him some help, but it soon became bloody and he knew if somebody saw that it would be taken away. There was no water in his room other than the can, so he sucked the toothbrush clean, sick with disgust at the taste of his own blood.

The endless hours passed so; finally came medication-time. With the vitamin-like pills came two small brownish tablets—the drug-deprival medicine?—and a tiny paper cup containing Maalox. So Redhead hadn't forgotten. He gulped it hungrily, and took the pills, dreaming of the beautiful yellow M-tabs he needed so.

Dinner came and went untasted, and then the night settled in. To his exasperation, they wouldn't switch off the ceiling light. He tossed and turned, finally ending with the small pillow over his eyes.

And then the deprivation really started on him. The random pains that had bothered him turned ten times worse, savage stabbings in his arms, legs, guts. His head throbbed. His mouth and eyes were painfully dry. And the skin-itch he had thought intolerable migrated into the

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interior of his joints, where he couldn't get at it. He had visions of armies of rustling termites marching with their little tickling legs, through his capillaries, and finally into the marrow of his bones. The only relief was to jerk the joint, but then it came back worse a moment later, so he had to jerk again. He tried to relax, but there was no respite from the beastly internal tickling and no hope of sleep. The light glared down on him, he was twisted and contorted and jerking in a pool of sweat, the rubber under him sticking everywhere. There was an interval he didn't remember clearly, which brought the two orderlies in to put him back to bed. At another point the heat was so bad that he got out and grabbed up the chair to push it through the screen and break the glass of the closed window. His weakness was appalling; but even so he managed a strong jab with the chair-legs. But this was no ordinary screen; the chair bounced back on him without leaving a dent in the wire. Weeping with frustration he tried again, with the same result, and finally staggered back into the bed to shiver and sweat. His nose itched and ran unceasingly. Nothing to wipe it on but his pajamas.

Only one part of the night he remembered: toward morning he must have fallen into a doze, and the nightmares began. The worst was a static image of the inside of a hut. A woman lay on the floor by his feet; he didn't want to look at her. But in front of his eyes a cloudy red-and-tan bundle hung in midair. He particularly didn't want to look at this; it seemed to him that if he saw it clearly he would die. He jerked himself awake, trembling and quivering all over his body.

Daylight brought some relief, but not much. He was weeping continuously now and retching. He had given up trying to keep himself clean; the bed was sodden. His bones had turned to termite-ridden Jello, and the pains gnawed and jabbed him. Once he thought that the worst was over, but soon the excruciating bone-deep tickling began again, and he lay jerking helplessly, unable to rest.

Time passed in a torture-ridden blur. Strange people looked in on him, spoke meaninglessly and did unhelpful things. Several times he became aware that he was raving and shouting, but had no idea what he said, or to whom. Medications came, and he promptly threw them up. Meals came and went; sometimes he upset the tray in his bed.

The vomiting began to give way to uncontrollable diarrhea. At first he tried to get out of bed and make it to the can, but he was so weak that soon he failed and lay in his filth on the floor until the next room-check.

The windows darkened, and night brought with it all symptoms intensified. At one point he became aware that his wrists and ankles were tied to the bed-rails, and roared in protest until his dry throat gave out. There was an IV stand by the bed; a face scolded him for tearing the needle out.

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Only toward morning did he fall into an exhausted doze, and the nightmares came again. He was with the patrol, rushing a bunch of Gués. The man next to him fell, screaming. He was holding a flamer to a thatched roof, the roof caught and roared up. And always there was the terrifying static scene of the interior of the hut, and the supine woman. By now he made out that she was wounded in the belly. He tried not to look at the ambiguous bundle hanging before his eyes, but it had more details; a bright point was sticking up from it, and something ran up to it from below. Also it moved and cried. He woke screaming to see the windows lightening, and experience the strange momentary relief that dawn seemed to bring.

Days and nights, how many he didn't know, passed so. The IV apparatus came again, and the tying up. He was too weak to protest.

Finally came the afternoon when he realized that the horrible internal tickling had given way to plain pain, which was far more bearable. When medication came next he was able to keep it down, and to drink a glass of water, which stayed down too. But his mood had changed; from anger and bewilderment he was in the grip of a terrible bleakness and despair. Every train of thought ended in horror and death. His body might be somewhat detoxified now, he thought, but his mind was not. If this was reality, he desperately needed the magic tabs which would keep it at a distance. Images of them floated in his mind; his need was so great that he had hallucinations they were somewhere in his room—surely in his duffelbag. Three times he crawled out of bed and searched, finding, of course, nothing. He wept. Behind the tears, an iron resolve formed; he would get hold of some somehow, get back on the regime which made life bearable, even pleasant. The tabs were everywhere at the front, distributed freely. That was where he belonged, not home. What was home compared to that relief?

That night he fell into a really deep sleep, and with it came a jumble of new nightmares. Himself firing directly into the face of a little mestizo boy, watching the boy's head explode. The platoon awakened at night by a rush of Gués toward the ammo cache. And again, that static hut interior, where he was standing by the wounded woman. He saw her wounds clearly now; her whole belly was opened, and skin and fat folded back from emptiness like a heavy fruit-rind. She writhed feebly. Knifework, that. And, inexorably, the amorphous bundle before his face cleared, became—Oh, no! —a bleeding newborn baby, skewered on a long machete blade. The lower part of the blade was clear now, there was a hand gripping the handle. Whose hand? Not his—Oh yes, *his,* he could feel the balance shift as its gruesome burden wriggled, moved its legs. A desperate squalling sound came from it.

He tore himself awake by sheer willpower, lay gasping as the windows

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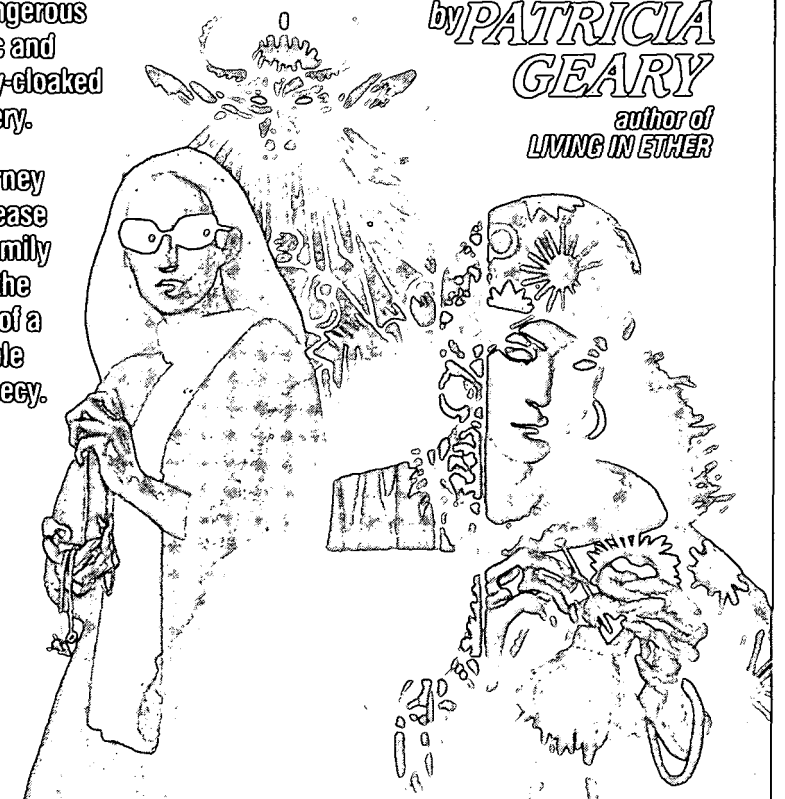

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paled. And in the growing light he knew—this was no nightmare, this was a memory. *He had done that thing.* He had gutted the parturient woman, skewered her baby on his knife. What came next he did not know—the deed itself was quite enough. Under the Battle-Zone tablets he had become a savage beast, seeing the enemy everywhere, even in the unborn. *He* had done this. And god knew what else. The sleeper-tabs had kept it from breaking through. God, how he needed one!

As day grew, a kind of sanity came back to him. For the first time in days he could think. He thought about what life would be like, remembering this deed. Impossible. His soul was one huge flinch. He could not help hearing the cries, seeing more details, smelling the stink of guts. No. He wanted only surcease, wanted to die.

To die—taking these horrors with him, forever finished. Yes. Every hour he remained alive he would be tortured by those scenes in his mind, by the utter shame and sickening remorse. Afraid of what else he might remember. He couldn't go on like this. To go home, bearing this living memory in him like a cancer? Never. He would die here, he would manage somehow.

The resolve seemed to ease him a little. But when he drifted to sleep again, the memory came back, and with it the brief touch of bloody little hands pawing at him, as he drove the machete in. He screamed and woke.

Some time later the little blonde nurse stuck her head in. "You're better!" she observed brightly. "All right, today you get corridor privileges. Up and out!"

He could barely make it; she had to assist him and let him lean along the wall crab-fashion as she took him out in the corridor. He blinked; he had forgotten that the world held more than that room of torment.

"You better practice so you can make meal-times. You'll get your meals up in the day-room now, no more service in bed." Somehow they had arrived at the grille ending the corridor. He held on and peered through it blearily.

"They unlock this when meals are served," she told him. "Someone will call you."

The mention of meals set him retching again, but nothing came out. She came along as he crab-walked back to Number 209. "Practice!" she repeated cheerily. When they got back inside he struggled for the can, but failed to make it. When the spasm was over, Miss Plastic helped him back to bed. From somewhere she had produced a mop.

"This is the last time. From now on you'll be expected to keep your room clean. The mop can stay in the corner here for awhile." Expertly she wrung it out in the can, washed her hands in the tank, and flushed.

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It came to him that the scene had been repeated over and over before this.

He didn't see how he could make that trip again, let alone eat anything, but at chow time the biggest orderly stuck his head in and ordered him out. He staggered into the corridor, found it filled with what seemed hundreds of people. The man coming out of 207 was bandaged all over his head and shoulders, only three black holes showing for eyes and mouth. Bemused, Don fumbled along the wall with the crowd to the open grille, found a big dolly stacked with trays. A man beside him said, "Look for your name." Seeing Don's helplessness, he asked, "What's your name?"

"Still."

"Smith?"

"No . . . Still."

The stranger pounced on a shelf. "Here it is. Take it and sit down at that table and eat, or they'll take it away."

"Thanks."

Shakily Don carried the tray over to an empty seat. Soup had sploshed all over. In spite of his illness, he managed to hoist a bowl of it and drink some. Surprisingly, it tasted good. He finished it. On all the trays the flatware was the same wobbly white plastic, like a cheap airline's. No metal.

When he got up to go, someone pulled his sleeve.

"Take your tray back or they'll get your ass."

"Oh, thanks." He hoisted up the iron-heavy tray, grateful for the strange camaraderie of this hell-hole. These others had been subject to Miss Plastic and her bully-boys, they knew the drill. He noticed a couple of men who kept rhythmically jerking their knees, tapping their feet. He knew what they were feeling—that ghastly unstoppable tickle. Did it ever go away for good?

When he got back to Number 209 the nice dark-haired nurse was making up his bed with clean sheets.

"Oh, thank you." He collapsed in the chair.

"And here are some clean pjs." He realized he'd been going around in sweaty shit-stained ones. God, he must stink.

"You can get clean ones any time from the laundry room. It's opposite the showers, down by the dayroom."

"Showers?"

"That's right. But you have to tell the nurse you're going in."

"Great. Thank you . . . The trouble is, I'm so weak. *Weak.* I can't believe only a few days ago I was in combat."

"That's the effect of amphetamine withdrawal, honey. You have to pay a price for being Superman for awhile."

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"How long does it last?"

"Until you exercise it away. That's the only cure, keeping active."

"But it seems to be worse every day. Weaker and weaker. I'm afraid I'll die here."

"Don't say that, honey. Nobody ever died from detox and they never will. You'll just get healthier and healthier." Earnestly looking at him, she went on. "You're perfectly safe here. Don't be afraid."

Something in her tone stuck him. You don't talk about dying here, he thought. They're afraid of suicides. That's what she means by safe. I can't get away. He chuckled painfully. "Safe" to him meant something quite different; well-secured perimeters, safety from Guévarista attack.

"Where are the Gués now? I don't know anything."

"The war's going well, I hear. The front's quite a ways farther than when you came in."

"I've got to get back."

"Oh, no you don't. The war's over for you, honey!" She bundled up the old sheets and prepared to leave.

"Thank you very much," he called after her. But a qualm had smitten him in the pit of the stomach. *She meant it.* No more, for him, the easy world of combat with the little yellow pill-cases full. What would he do at home? Roam the night streets, looking for black-market Ms? No way. He had to get back. Back at the front was everything he needed, including the neat way to die.

Depression and nausea washed over him deeper as he got into bed. The images of the dying woman, the tortured baby came again. He couldn't go on like this. Couldn't. Hatred of himself was like a poisonous fog in his head. It lasted all afternoon.

That night when he got to the tray-dolly he found that someone had made a mistake. A real metal knife lay gleaming on the tray that held butter and catsup, just above his own.

Nobody was watching. It was the work of an instant to get that beautiful knife into his pajama leg, stuck into the bandage.

He made himself pretend to eat, to wait until others were leaving. Then he hobbled back to 209 with his prize. Relief. The way out. But that would be at night; where to hide it meanwhile?

He found the perfect place—a loose piece of molding in the upper window edge. All but the very end slid neatly inside. Then he took it out again—it was much too dull, it needed sharpening. The window-screen might do.

Between room-checks he honed it carefully. It took a decent edge. He tested it on his wrist, leaving a thin red line that oozed a red drop at one end. Okay. He put the knife back in its hidey-hole and lay in the bed, studying his wrists and memorizing where the best cuts would be . . . A

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peaceful death, bleeding. You just got cold. Pity he couldn't hang his arms over the edge of the bed to drain, but room-checkers would spot that. They wouldn't spot blood under him in the bed until much too late . . . . He'd have to cut deep, get the arteries flowing well. That would hurt—but not so much as the stuff in his head. *That* would never hurt him again.

Some commotion was going on in the corridor, but he took no notice. Not his concern. Never again, his concern . . . . The noise was from the next room, where the bandaged man was. Someone had told Don that he was a cook, burned by a stove-fire. He was due for a lot of plastic surgery after detox. Now he seemed to be just outside Don's door, yelling at someone. "Leave my room alone!" It didn't seem to do any good. Doors banged.

Presently Don's own door opened, and Miss Plastic marched in, followed by the two big blond orderlies. Don had named them in his mind, *Hans und Klaus*.

"Get up and sit in the chair, please."

"Chair? Why?"

"Just get up and let us at your bed. This is routine."

As he went to the chair, Hans intercepted him and gave him a quick but efficient body-search, patting all down his pajama legs. Then he seized Don's hand and turned it over and grunted. He held it out to show the nurse the cut wrist. She nodded, grimly. The search intensified.

Klaus was stripping the bed thoroughly. Sheets, rubber, pillowcase, all went on the floor. Then he expertly flipped over the mattress to expose the springs and searched all around the bottom and the bed-rails.

Don had got it by now. They were looking for the knife. *His* precious knife. Thank god he had resisted his first impulse to hide it under the spring-bars.

Klaus had been circling the room, checking the baseboards. When he came to the set of drawers, he and the nurse took it apart, looking at the bottoms of every drawer, the bottom of the chest. Then he turned to check thoroughly around the toilet and in the tank, while Miss Plastic put the drawers back in. Hans was heaping bedding and pillow on the bed.

"Now sit on the bed, please." Dumbly he obeyed. They went over the chair. Then Klaus and Hans went back to the baseboards, while the nurse dumped out his duffelbag.

Hans was circling the room now, looking higher and higher. A quick probe of the door jamb, the electric outlet—and then he was at the window. Don sat rigid, not daring to breathe or look, while Hans' hands ran around the lower sills. Klaus was stuffing his things back into the duffel. Miss Plastic had gone to the door, frowning and tapping her foot.

"All right." They seemed about to leave. Don's heart thudded with

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relief—but suddenly Hans turned back and ran his hand along the top of the window molding. Oh, no!—A rustle, and, damn it, god damn it—he was drawing out the knife from its hiding place, looking at it curiously, testing the edge Don had put on it.

Miss Plastic and Klaus were advancing on him with a canvas thing.

"Just slip your arms in here."

"What is it?"

"A tux," Hans said, and giggled. They had his hands drawn halfway down the sleeves before he could react. But when his hands found no cuffs, he realized what it was—they were putting a straitjacket on him!

"No! *No!*"

"Come on soldier, relax. You're due for a night in the Quiet Room."

"What? I haven't done anything, you can't—"

Much too late he started to struggle. He was on the bed now, face down, with Hans on top of him and Klaus tightening the long straitjacket sleeves around his body. He kicked, kicked, could connect with nothing. Then Klaus was kneeling on his legs, pulling up a heavy zipper.

In seconds he was being hustled out into the corridor, helpless. Even so, his training enabled him to swing them, to get one hearty kick aimed at Klaus' crotch. But at the last minute he he held it—he couldn't win here, god knew what nasty revenges they would wreak on him if he broke Klaus' balls.

His first impressions of the Quiet Room were heat, and the stink of disinfectant. There was no window, only the small heavy glass insert in the door. There was a can with no seat. A bare mattress lay on the floor skew-wise. That was all.

They dumped him on the mattress, and then came the final indignity—they pulled off his pajama pants. He was protesting and crying out, and he could hear how his voice sounded muted. The Quiet Room was efficiently soundproofed. The faint keening he had heard near here might have been someone yelling his lungs out.

"How long? How long?" he beseeched.

"We'll see," said Miss Plastic crisply, and they marched out. The door slammed to with a heavy thud.

He got up behind them, to press his face against the glass in the door. It was one-way. Behind his own reflection he could make out only the blur of a ceiling light. In despair, he let himself fall back on the mattress. But there was no relaxing—under the straitjacket the invisible insects were starting their scratching again.

That night he could not, would not remember.

He tried things, nearly breaking his teeth. He located a rough edge on the toilet and backed up to it, sawing the canvas against it. But he accomplished only the smoothing of the metal edge, the damn jacket

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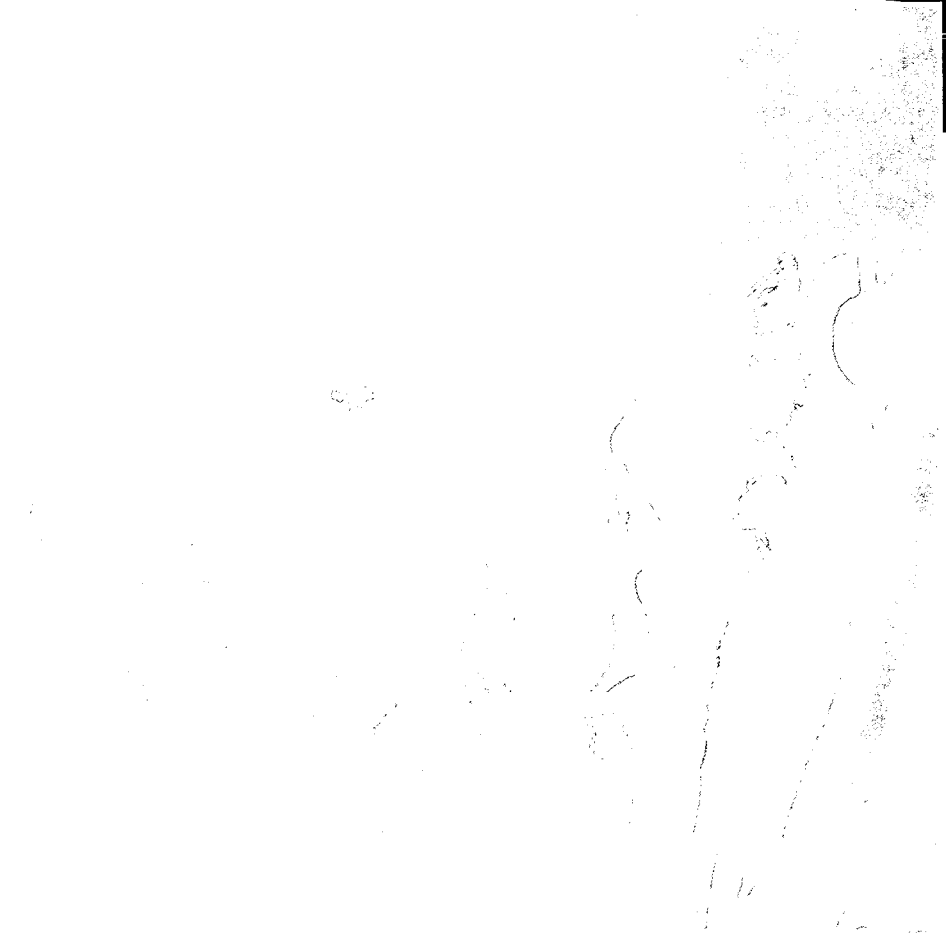

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wasn't normal canvas but some super-stuff. He spent an hour leaning against the door with his face to the glass. Once a head loomed up outside. He shouted "Help!" with all his might. The head went away.

The diarrhea came back, he tried to make the can but fouled himself. The insect-itching was beyond belief, he could not lie down but paced, paced, paced the tiny hot room.

Finally weakness felled him, he crawled to the mattress and lay curled in a crazy ball, jerking. And on, hour after torment-filled hour . . .

Sometime during the eternity the door opened and the dark-haired nurse came in. She had a glass of water for him, and a cool wet cloth with which she mopped his face. He felt unbelievably good.

"How . . . longer?"

She frowned. "Soon, now. I'll speak to somebody."

"What is this . . . bad-cop-good-cop routine?"

She didn't get it, just shook her head No.

"Look, I'm not yelling . . . any more . . . I'll be . . . good."

Gently she said, "Here's something a patient told me, he said it helps. Find some place on your body that doesn't hurt—maybe your left ear, maybe a hand, your tongue, maybe. Anything that isn't hurting—you concentrate on that. Think *only* about this place that isn't hurting. *Think* about it. I was told it really helps."

She went away.

He tried her recommendation. Maybe it helped.

When the light in the door-window was changing, Hans and Klaus came in. They boosted him up and untied the jacket. His arms were so stiff he could barely pull them free.

All dirty and naked as he was, he was led back through the empty corridor and pushed onto the bed. He was careful to say nothing, not to resist in any way. He had done some thinking.

The point was, to get out of here. Ending his life here was just plain impossible, they'd convinced him of that. He was terminally "safe," all right.

So he had to get out their way. He had to go along. Grin, pretend to be getting better, stand everything. No asking, even for Maalox. No arguing about gradual detoxification. Even smile at Miss Plastic . . .

Could he do it? Oh Christ, Oh Christ, for even a quarter of an M-tab! He was so weak, so weak. Could he do all that cold, keep it up?

He had to.

After all, they thought he was headed home, they couldn't keep him here forever. And he guessed they were overcrowded—there'd been a lot of beds visible through the grille, in the big domed room he'd waked up in. Probably they were eager to mark him "cured" and get shut of him.

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Probably they were eager to see that their savage system worked, that he was successfully "detoxed."

He smiled grimly lying in his dirt and shame. He'd be playing to an audience that wanted to believe.

So he tried. Almost falling, with weakness, he carried his trays to the table, made himself eat, spoke friendly to the guys beside him, and didn't tell anybody when he got back to his room and threw it all up. The world spinning around him with dizziness, he paced the corridor, swinging his arms. "For exercise." The dark-haired nurse smiled at him. When Miss Plastic stuck her head in on her fifteen-minute checks, he made himself smile and greet her. Once he even apologized for giving her so much trouble. She smiled and said, "That's what we're here for, soldier." In his mind's eye he held a picture of what she'd be here for if he had a chance, and grinned back. He made a try at keeping his room clean, used the mop when a check was due.

But the trouble was, he wasn't getting any better, inside. The nights were hells of nightmare memories. And he grew not stronger but weaker; the weakness was like an iron yoke on his shoulders, and every effort left him dizzy and gasping. He hid this as well as he could, blaming his occasional falls on the loose hospital slippers. One day he made it to the showers, and nearly drowned himself fainting in the stall. He found the linen-room and clean pajamas, but it took him half an hour to get them on, leaning against the shelves, the room almost blacked out. Weaker day by day.

What was the plan—that his body must relearn to make the substances, as somebody had told him? What if his body wouldn't, what if he was too far gone? He didn't know much about his internal workings, nor care, but he did know that individuals varied greatly. What if he were the one who didn't recover, whose adrenaline gland or whatever had died? He felt he was running on a shrinking energy-supply, like an exhausted battery, each day less. He became genuinely frightened that he couldn't keep up the deception, that he would be stuck here with his unbearable memories forever.

But, miraculously, it worked. They *were* overcrowded in the detox wing. In less than a week he found himself ordered to move again, this time to a corridor with chairs in it, with open access to the space between the grilles, the "dayroom." At the far end of the corridor were normal double doors, giving onto a green gardeny-looking place. His room was no bigger; but he had a table, and the window, though screened, had clear glass and curtains. He went to it, looked out on a wall and a tangled garden. And the glass could be opened by a screw-handle through the screens! He made his trembling arms turn them wide, sank down on the

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chair to pant in the fresh air. Oh, god! For a moment he actually felt better.

On his second day there he was given "Grounds privilege." Hans came and unlocked the end doors and pointed out the path around the untended garden. "Take walks! Three a day." He went back in.

For a few minutes he couldn't believe it. Air! Openness! He buried his face in an overblown big red rose flower. Perfume of wine, perfume of freedom . . .

Tentatively, slowly, he walked out along the path. An eight-foot chain-wire fence topped by triple barbed wire ran beside him. Nothing he could climb. The fence enclosed the garden and a piece of wild country with trees just outside it.

Just then a twinge of dysentery struck him. He pushed through the garden hedge toward a small grove of pines. They'd run the fence outside this. He could see why—the grove was edged with a shoulder-high growth of thorn-bushes. He fought his way through these to a tiny clearing in the center. Here he stopped, warned by a familiar smell. It took him an instant to locate the cause, under the blanket of pine-needles.

For sure, the fencing team hadn't bothered to check out this grove. A dead GI lay among the needles, his M-30 by his outstretched hand. The hand was almost gone to bone; the body was weirdly shrunken and desiccated under its shell of body-armor. He must have been killed when they finally took San Izqierda. But Don stopped not to think of this—with a strangled cry he flung himself down beside the dead man, his hand clawing at the inside pocket of the rigid vest.

And—oh, god in heaven!—it was there!

Incredulous, he drew out the small yellow case, opened it with fingers all but out of control. It was—full! Oh, precious, precious—he stared at the rows of Ms, the slot of BZs, the line of Sleepers. Here, in his hand. Carefully, carefully, he drew out an M and closed the box, before swallowing it. What incredible luck, come to save him just as he was at his last strength!

Then his body made its needs felt again, and he hastily dropped his pants. Squatting there, he saw that the dead man had been on the same mission—his armor pants were down. Somebody had seen him, or was waiting there, the corpse's lowest parts were blown away, grey fragments of pelvis sticking out of the long-dead meat. Big black tarry puddle, mess, so old that the flies were almost gone. Death finished up quickly down here. But leaving him the priceless pack in his hands, the first faint glow stealing through his veins.

Where to hide it?

Under his leg bandage. Then he rose and made his way carefully back

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to the path, around to the door. On his way he noticed that the big link fence had a set of gates, chained and padlocked.

He knocked on the glass, and Hans presently let him back in, locking up behind him.

"Great walk," he babbled at Hans. "Makes you feel better already."

In his room he took careful thought. Here they didn't do the fifteen-minute check, but no telling when someone would come in. Finally he took the pills out of the case, and hid them by ones and twos, in the hems of the curtain, under the edge of the electric outlet, in a crack around the back of the can, and other nooks. He wouldn't forget where they were, not he! At supper-time he slipped the empty box, twisted out of recognition, into the waste-can that came with the trays.

Dinner that night was a time of glory. The weakness had faded to a mild fatigue, all pains were gone; the M was affecting him the way it used to, giving a rosy glow of alertness, all trouble far away. He talked to people, asked them questions and listened to the answers, even helped one of the zombies from the detox corridor to find his tray. The man grunted at him; looking closely at his eyes, Don saw the redness left by BZs not quite gone. His arm was in a heavy sling, sticking out from his side. "It'll get better," Don told him gently. "You just have to put up with the shit." The man grunted again.

Seeing Miss Plastic, Don saluted her cheerfully and told her that the garden walk had really set him up. Better be careful, he warned himself. I'm acting drunk. He toned down his grin.

She frowned. "If you're going to be going outside, soldier, you'd better wear some clothes."

"Clothes?"

"In the laundry room you'll find fatigues. That's what they're there for."

Better and better. On his way back to his room he collected a set that seemed to have all its buttons and parts. The laundry here was done by rock-crusher, he thought merrily, glowing with all-rightness.

That night he had his Sleeper, and slept for the first time, sweetly, without dreams. Whatever the war had brought was far away and somebody else's story.

His last thought was that he must be systematic, ration the pills. They had to get him back to the front. He knew now that he was hooked; with the tabs he was normal, without them he was a sick shadow. And the front was where they were. It wouldn't be hard to break away and head there; not many people went AWOL *to* the fighting. And with a little fast talking, any unit would take him in.

The next days passed like floating flowers. Again and again he had to caution himself not to act too euphoric, but no one seemed to see

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anything odd. Even the dark-haired nurse accepted his story of what the garden and the flowers had done for him, and smiled tenderly.

Then came the morning when everybody but he seemed to know he'd be leaving the next day, with four or five other guys who had been detoxed.

That afternoon he found out something else, too. Had he miscalculated or forgotten? Whichever, he could locate no more Ms. Search as he would, there were none. The NDs and the BZs were okay, but no Maintenance. What the hell, he'd been without before, he could make it.

But as the hours dragged by and the insects began to show up again, his resolve weakened. He fingered a red BZ. They were supposed to be for when you were in actual contact with the enemy. But here, far from the front, what could they do to him? He couldn't recall any bad effects, except a burst of strength. . . .

A nonexistent termite column crawled under his waistband, he writhed to scratch it. A minute later he had to do it again. Oh, god, not this . . . if he watched himself carefully, didn't let anyone look too closely at his eyes, it'd be all right.

He popped the BZ.

. . . As he'd thought, nothing happened except that he felt more alert and the bugs faded out. Colors seemed lighter and brighter, too. Hell, BZs are only some kind of super pep-pill, he thought. But he'd gotten sloppy; he was standing right in front of the window, where any stranger could look in and see him. Perfect target. He backed away, pulling the curtains to.

His mind drifted to his last day of combat. Hill Number thirteen-forty-seven, that's what they were taking. Down here they called mountains "hills." The front was well ahead of there by now, people said. But where was the enemy now?

He glanced worriedly around, opened a chink in the curtains and peered out. Nothing moving out there. Nothing in the corridor, either. Or, wait—his ears seemed to have sharpened—there were some footsteps up at the far end in the dayroom. Little tapping steps.

As he listened, they grew clearer, sharper. Heading his way now!

And he could catch a faint jangling sound. Aha, that would be the big key-ring Miss Plastic wore on her wrist.

Enemy sounds, coming along the wall. Coming for him?

Automatically he flexed his hands, fingered the callus on the outer edges of his palms. Had they grown soft? Did someone think they could take him, now? He sidled to the door, listening hard.

The footsteps were alone.

The little blonde nurse came on duty early again that afternoon. She

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takes extra duty a lot, partly because there is nothing to do in San Izquierda, but mostly because of a nagging sense of responsibility. Twice, coming back, she has found doors open that should have been locked. People were so sloppy. Right now, for instance, both the orderlies are out on lunch break together, quite contrary to orders. She looks round the dayroom; no hard cases here. But are the garden doors locked? The orderlies have grown specially careless about that, now that so many patients have Grounds privilege.

She decides to check them before she does the detox ward check.

She straps on her official key-ring, and starts down the empty corridor, tap-tap-tap.

As she passes one of the last doors, it opens silently and a shadowy face looks out, right into hers.

To cover her start, she smiles brightly and starts to say, "Hello, soldier."

They are the last sounds she ever utters.

She never knew what struck her throat, smashing the delicate larynx and crushing her vocal chords. She had no idea that the human hand could strike such a blow as the Army's sentry chop, no idea that she could be rendered voiceless before she had a chance to scream.

Bent over with pain, she feels herself being dragged into the room. Her clothes are being yanked up. She beats futilely at inhumanly strong hands. A voice says thickly, "You know I'm going to kill you afterwards?"

And then a smashing blow hits her face, breaking teeth, and another.

"You won't be a cute corpse."

The orderly he called Hans had given him the idea with his bed-search. Now Don heaves up the mattress, and flattens the little corpse on the sagging springs. No blood on him, no blood anywhere. He pulls the mattress back—there's scarcely a discernible mound. To disguise it he makes up the bed tight and neat. Anyone looking in would see a nice clean empty room, soldier.

Now to fix up a few little things, collect his pills and go. He has taken charge of the key-ring first thing; there were two padlock-type keys on it.

The corridor is empty, Hans and Klaus are nowhere to be seen. The garden door is locked, but the first key he tries opens it smoothly. He slips out, locks up behind him. In a moment he is forcing his way into the little pine-grove.

Nothing has changed, except a few more pine-needles on the corpse's face. His first thought had been the gun and ammo—but wait, he'll need ident. He grabs the dead man's dog-tags. Its chain slices through the poor hollow shell of neck. Isidore West—he is Isidore West now. Isidore

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for San Izzy. West hadn't been carrying any papers, only a crumpled snapshot of a girl. Well, he'll be welcome wherever he turns up.

Maybe the body-armor would be a good idea too. Reluctantly he slides the dead man out of his jerkin, but can't bring himself to touch the fouled breeches. He shakes a big black beetle out of the vest, and gets it on under his fatigues, the usual way. Ammo belts on top.

Okay, now out the gate, the M-30 stuck into the loose fatigue legs. At the last minute he picks up two grenades West had been carrying, and hooks them on his belt.

The second key opens the fence-gate padlock, and he exits neatly before anyone comes out to the garden. Good; he doesn't want any more hassles, although he now has a neat place to stow any bodies. He resnaps the chain and lock behind him.

Outside is a gravel road. A sign points to San Izquierda, it carries a silhouette of a bus. Good. Transport is what he needs, and GIs can ride free on buses.

But he wishes he had a map. The front must be somewhere to the north—he can identify that by the sun—but where and how far? He recalls the company's maps, with their neatly-drawn lines and estimates of Gué position and strength, even his own company marked in. Somewhere up in the States men are sitting in peaceful rooms, drawing such lines. Numbering hills. Moving little tin soldiers over the terrain, as word comes to them.

He is one little soldier out of place, but the map-makers won't know that. He and Isidore West.

Chuffing behind him. He whirls, but it is only the San Izquierda bus, on its way out from the town. It stops beside him, right on cue, and a girl gets out. For a flash, he thinks it's the girl who chopped his nails. But no matter now; he hops in and hobbles back down the aisle, still concealing his gun. The BZ feels like it's running low. He sits down on the back seat, fishes out another and swallows.

The bus holds only a few passengers; three women with babies, a few very old women and men, two or three children, baskets of chickens, and a pig with a rope on its hinder legs.

He waits till the hospital is well behind them before slipping out the gun. It needs cleaning badly, but it's functional. Cradling it in one arm, he makes his way up to the driver.

"Where are the Guévaristas now?" he asks in his painful Spanish.

"Nada, nada," the driver seems amused.

"But where is the fighting?" Don persists. "I am lost." As he says it he realizes he's saying he has perished, so he tries again. *"Me equivocado*—I've made a mistake. *Dondé*—where are they? *Mis amigos* are there. I must go to my friends."

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"Ah!" The driver gestures grandly ahead. *"Al norte*—far, *muy lejos,* very far."

"Ah," he says in his turn, *"Gracias.* I go with you to the north. I do not want to go back to San Izquierda."

"Si."

He turns and heads back to his seat, nearly falling over the pig.

At the next stop an old woman with chickens gets off and a boy on crutches swings himself on. He is minus one foot, the leg ends in a dirty sock strapped up. He looks a very young sixteen. As he sits down Don sees that he is wearing Gué uniform pants under his smock, and his one boot is Gué combat issue. A wounded veteran, apparently, left behind when the front moved on. The boy casts him a sharp look, then turns his head away.

Don flinches, takes out another BZ. But it doesn't work fast enough to prevent him from thinking of those easy-living men up home in their war-rooms, drawing lines on maps, moving their tin soldiers.

The bus keeps chuffing northward, now and then stopping to let people off. Going home after a day in San Izquierda. Here and there in the woods are tucked little Maya-style *casitas,* each with its tiny corn-and-melon-and-bean plot. Almost all have a papaya tree leaning close to the roof.

The bus passes a hamlet. Here almost all the houses have been burned and gutted, but two old men get off. The boy with one foot is still aboard, talking to a middle-aged woman. His tone sounds angry.

Don can't help staring at him, feeling adrenalin pump a little. Had this lad been one of those who had ambushed B Company, back before Hill thirteen-forty-seven? A lot of his comrades bought it then. It was well inside Bodégua, but no one knew how far. The border was mushy here, it supposedly followed a mountain ridge that divided and divided again. *It's their country,* a voice had kept saying in Don's head. Just as the pants that boy was wearing were the official uniform of their army. However unsavory their government, it was theirs. Not his, to invade and shoot up their sons. But this was the *enemy,* a limb of International Atheist Red Communism. He didn't look much like the enemy, or a limb of anything now.

The boy laughs sharply at something the woman is saying, and turns to glance at Don. *"Yanqui,"* he says under his breath, or seems to say—the bus is making so much noise it's hard to be sure. *"Yanqui* assassin." He looks hard at Don, meeting his eyes, then suddenly seems to see something that changes his mood. He slumps in his seat, saying something to the woman. She gathers her baskets, gets off at the next stop.

It comes to Don that his eyes must be reddening from the BZs and the boy had seen that and knew that Don was a berserker. They know about BZs, all right.

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The bus has turned off the main road, and seems to be circling back toward San Izquierda. He'll have to get off and start looking for a ride north.

Suddenly the boy cocks his head to listen. The bus stops, and Don can hear it too now—the heavy rumble of six-by-sixes. In a moment it comes in sight on the road they'd left—a long convoy of camouflage-painted trucks and weapons-carriers. American soldiers were crowded in the trucks, hanging their legs out over the tailgates. That would be replacements and supplies headed for the front. That's the kind of ride he wants to catch. And that must be the main road to the front, too. He'll get out here and go back and wait.

Just as he's making his way up to the doors, there comes another sound. The crippled boy gives a peculiar whistle. Then Don hears it—under the convoy's noise and the bus's engine is a steady slapping beat—a chopper. Probably guarding the convoy. But wait a minute—the sound isn't right. He twists to stare out the back window and catches a glimpse.

No mistaking—the ugly square end of a Krasny 16, guns sticking out. A Gué fireship, out after the convoy.

Meanwhile guns have opened up ahead, from something he can't see. The fireship slides neatly sideways, out of sight over the ridge. All sounds cease.

For a second Don has a double flash; BZs sometimes do that to you. It's so peaceful here, in an ordinary bus on a quiet country road, the pines rustling in the soft wind. He feels disastrously out of place.

And then the sun flashes on copter blades beyond the ridge, and there's the racket of guns and thuds out of view to the right. The people in the bus come to life in a general stampede for the doors. They know a bus could be a target, they'd rather take their chances by ones and twos in the brush. The pig screams.

But the driver resists. He shouts "San Izquierda! San Izquierda!" and the bus starts fast. People are pounding on the doors, yelling at him to stop. Don is beside him now, he grabs the emergency brake, but it has no effect. He gets his foot down on the brake, the driver pushes him and tries to punch him away. Don punches back. The bus wobbles to a stop, the doors open, and people pour out, including the boy on crutches. At the last minute, the driver yells something and dives for the door after them, leaving Don alone in the bus.

Panting, he sits down in the driver's seat to consider. Now he really has transport—he can turn this thing around and follow the convoy till the gas gives out.

There's a crossroad just ahead. But as he looks, it fills up, first with cattle, then with a bunch of civilian-looking cars, obviously waiting for

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the cows to clear. Clean, expensive-looking cars with fender flags on them. Even the escort jeeps are shiny clean, with little flags too. Obviously it's some kind of high-level party touring here. They seem unaware of the Gué fireship behind him. Senior-looking civilians, shining generals, and a woman, have gotten out, are staring around at the scenery, looking at San Izquierda which must be right below them. To Don's amazement, several of the men produce cameras and start to take photos. *Tourists,* by God, Don thinks.

And then corrects himself. These aren't tourists—these are, these are some of the easy-living men he'd dreamed of, the ones sitting in front of big terrain maps, drawing lines, while their aides move little soldiers and flags around.

Without thinking, he has popped another BZ.

Without thinking, he has started the bus. Automatically, he unhooks the two grenades and arms then. Meticulously, he breaks out the front window with his gun-butt, then reverses the gun to point out.

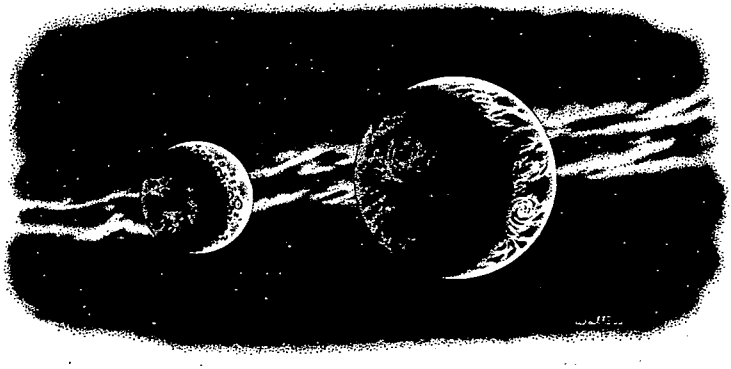
The men ahead are getting into their cars, all bunched together.

Good.

A raging fury he has never experienced roars through his body. Do those men know, can they guess, that the little figures they move around are real live men and boys, boys who bleed?

The front, the Guévaristas, fade far away. His foot slams down on the accelerator, the old bus churns forward. Faster, faster yet. Don is half-crouched now, his rifle through the empty windshield. Standing on the gas, steering with one elbow, he takes aim. Faster yet the bus surges forward, dead toward them. The grenades tick. The first burst comes from his rifle, finding targets. Then another. Screams.

—And Don Still, standing on the gas on his glory ride, fires, fires, fires—his enemy in his sights at last. ●



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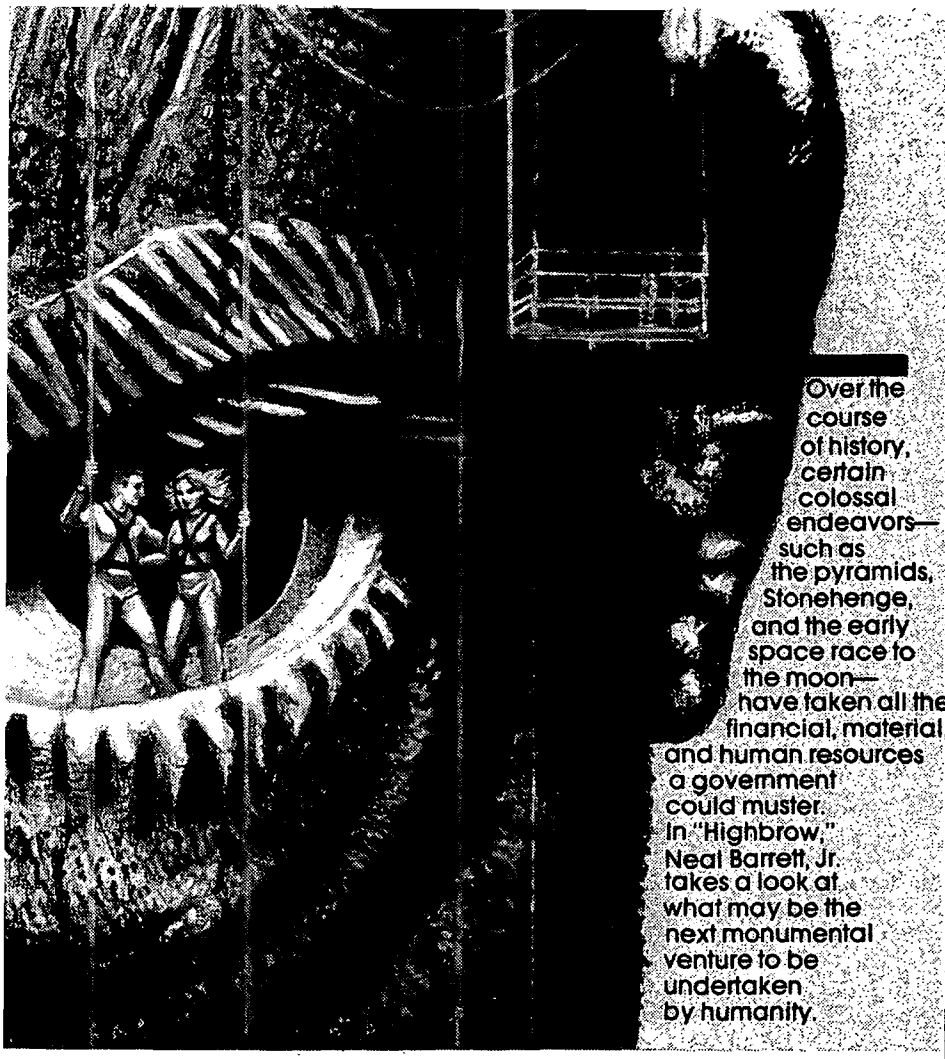

Over the course of history, certain colossal endeavors—such as the pyramids, Stonehenge, and the early space race to the moon—have taken all the financial, material, and human resources a government could muster. In "Highbrow," Neal Barrett, Jr. takes a look at what may be the next monumental venture to be undertaken by humanity.

HIGHBROW

by Neal Barrett, Jr.

art: Hank Jankus

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Will gave his weight to the sling, thrusting his feet firmly against the broad granite face. The crews worked above and to his right. The sound of chisels was swept away at once by the wind that razored the heights. He leaned half a mile into California air. The rope gave him forty feet of slack. Higher, it clipped to the A-ring and the less flexible cable. The cable stretched up and out of sight to the winch station at Hairline, fifty yards above. He could lean in and snake-whip the rope and move about in an arc either way. When the angle gave out he'd have to signal the call-boy to pass the word to the winch. He decided to let it go. The kid was likely asleep. He pushed off and swung twenty feet and caught the webbing, got a sound grip and loosed himself from the sling. Hooked the sling to the webbing so the boy wouldn't decide to haul it up.

Eyebrow was twenty feet below. His crew crawled about the granite hedge, cutting and chipping furred striations. The scaffolding snaked crookedly over Eyelid, seventy-five feet to the bridge of Nose. The other brow was Mink's. Mink was perched in a sling, pretending to watch his crew on the other side. What he was doing was watching Will's people work. Will didn't care. He could look all day if he liked. All of Mink's craft was in his hands. He had no feeling for the stone. You had to feel the stone in your head and in your heart.

A shadow slid over Face. Will looked up. A steam-driven flyer clattered by. Rods pumped and thrashed driving eight bat wings in partial accord. Streamers flew from the tail. The gondola was painted gold, hung from a fine confusion of wires and struts. Japanese tourists took pictures. Quaker, standing by the winch station above, shook his fist and waved a small red flag. The craft lurched off, leaving a trail of soot. Three weeks before, Eva Duke had mooned Norwegian balloonists. Will decided this accounted for increased aerial traffic.

Taft-Hartly wasn't looking at the flyer. He was leaning on the scaffolding, frowning out to sea. "I don't much like the weather," he told Will. "I don't plan to work up here in no storm. Quaker can ground my ass if he likes. I saw Eddie House after lightning got him working on Nose. Welded him to the rock like snot."

Will dropped goggles around his neck and sniffed the air. T.H. was right. Something was forming off the coast. A smudge on the horizon, air thickening into a haze. The sun was still bright up top but San Clemente was a blur, a sight through dirty glass. A steamer hugged the coast, sluggishly towing barges loaded with granite into port. Will looked up and studied his work. The furrowed crest of granite was a honeycomb ridge brooding twenty-four feet out from Face to shade the Eyes. Close, it appeared to be sedimentary art, the tunnels of ants exposed, uncovered and petrified. Seen from San Clemente, the road that followed the coast, from the decks of clippers at sea, tourists and sailors marveled at the

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sight. The brows lived; sun and shadow worked their magic, tricks of corrugation and the subtle play of light. Stone became the stern and somber visage. The left brow and the right were in theory of equal craft, but Will knew the right had the touch. That Mink knew too, and was totally unable to guess why.

"You'll get it," said Taft-Hartly, seemingly reading Will's thoughts. "Odds are eight to five, but I figure it'll go higher than that."

Will was irritated and showed it. There was something wrong with betting on his career. The sky was growing darker by the moment. Clouds considered wearing slate. The breeze was stiff and cool and heavy with salt.

"Get the crew started up," said Will. "I don't want anyone down here when it hits."

"I don't wager any myself, you understand," said T.H. "I'm just telling you so you'll know."

"Yeah, right." Will looked up at Mink. Mink appeared to be taking notes.

Others could see the storm as well, and soon finishers and joiners, polishers and pointers, were scrambling up from Eyebrows and Nose, climbing up to Hairline to beat the threatening wind. A call-boy finally dared to tell Quaker. He lurched out of the winch shack, hoisted the weather flag, and sent the steam whistle wailing over the heights. By then all but stragglers were on top. Bright crooked wires kissed the sea. Wind shivered the surface, sweeping flat water from blue to gray. San Clemente vanished as the front curled to shore in a fierce convexity of rain, slashing at coastal roads and the worktowns to the south. The first heavy drops measled granite the color of sand. Droplets formed tears, and tears coursed streams. Rain gathered to sweep down Nose across Cheeks, part and come together at the grim curve of Mouth, drawn in small rivers to the great cleft of Chin where a rushing cascade fell to Chest. Other currents swirled from Neck and Shoulders, surged and met in a torrent past Beltline and Statesman's Cape and Trousers, gaining speed and power for some two thousand feet until a cataract drummed with a roar on the roofs of hall and cloister, gatehouse and tower, barbican and bridge, those mammoth structures carved in Greco-Brit-California splendor, nestled between colossal granite Shoes. And when this great swell of water reached the ground, it was quickly carried away in pipes and gutters, cleverly channeled and directed by engineering marvel, rushed to vast reservoirs that nourished the formal gardens and graceful fountains which delighted Serbian tourists, and retired assassin couples from as far away as Spain.

Above, Will made his way through substantial blocks of granite, the

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site of his future or maybe Mink's. These giant squares rested, waited to be joined and shaped and formed to crown the glory of the Work. In his heart, Will knew Quaker wouldn't fuck him up. Quaker was old and fuddled but he was still a Master pointer. He wouldn't give the hair to Mink. Even if he didn't care for Will he loved the Work. He'd started as a boy, a rough-shaper, worked his way to carver, then chief assistant pointer to Don Debate, and finally to Master when Debate had a seizure and fell from Mole. Fifty years on Face and he wouldn't turn that over to Mink. Will couldn't see him doing that.

Lightning struck the tall iron beam raised above winch station for that purpose. Will ducked. Rain blew in his eyes. The sharp crack of sound pressed his skin. He smelled burning air. The crews were huddled up before the cages. The steam engines wheezed and snaked cable. The crews waited, standing in the rain or under the narrow tin roof when there was room. Their faces were granite white, rain-streaked now like weary tigers. Hammer and rasp and chisel hung heavy from their belts.

The crews kept to themselves. Mink's crew and Will's and the polishers who worked for Court. Up here they didn't talk. Down below they'd drink beer, mix, and fornicate with ease. Will couldn't see it. He didn't feel close to the others. Just his own. The others were like strangers; he didn't know their skills and didn't trust them.

Taft-Hartly nodded and Will crowded into the next available cage. There were three elevators for the crew. Will had the clout to take Express, but that would mean riding down with Quaker. Maybe listening to Mink suck up to the old man. Will would rather swing down on a rope.

The crews squeezed into place. Tight and smelling of rain and rock and sweat. No one talked. The elevator rattled and jerked. Because of the height of the Work each crew elevator was really a bank of five. That meant a change every four hundred feet.

T.H. punched Will, and Will glanced out the side. The elevators hugged the back of the Work, adjacent to the step-angle ramps that wound ziggurat fashion from Base to Head, a mountain of rock and soil that let the mules haul granite to the top. Will saw a mule team in trouble. They'd been caught in the downpour at Beltline, and ten-ton blocks had slipped precariously close to the edge. The crews were running about trying to figure what to do.

"Those guys are nuts," said Taft-Hartly. "I wouldn't do that for nothing."

Will didn't answer. Annie Page gave him a wink. Will nodded politely. The elevator rumbled to a halt. The engine house protested, offered death-rattle sounds. Cables seemed appeased. Will hated the ride twice a day, every day of his life. It was far safer to be at work than leave it.

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"You want a beer, you're welcome to come," said T.H. "Be glad to have you." A ritual invitation, but T.H. was determined to pursue it.

"Thanks. I got to do some stuff for Pop."

"You don't want to worry about Mink. You got it for sure, Will."

Will stopped. "Just quit doing this, all right?"

"Well sure. Okay." T.H. looked hurt, as if he had some deformity of the jaw. "The whole crew's pulling for you, is all."

"All right."

"People care, you know."

"Fine."

"Listen. I'm not going to bring this up again. I don't think you want to talk about it much."

"You see right through me, T.H."

"Well hell, we been working together a long time, you know?"

Taft-Hartly trotted off. There was a bigger crowd than usual by the steamhouse, the taverns and stores clustered about. Rain had brought the topsiders down at the same time the grounder shift changed. Yellow jumpsuits mixed with green. Workers spilled from tunnels that led to vaulted halls and chapels, columned rooms that channeled through the vast expanse of Base. The storm was passing on. The sun was overly bright and steam rose from the ground. Rooftops made a thousand flashing mirrors in Milhous, and the worktowns to the south.

It was then that Will saw her. Striding with a purpose through the crowd as if people were no obstruction. She appeared to be practicing for a race. He was struck by her at once. He felt a great sense of loneliness for someone he didn't know. A tall girl with bony features and a fiercely defiant chin. He longed to know in defiance of what. And then she was suddenly gone. A cropped head of hair catching the sun.

He thought about her all the way home. Imagined knowing her name and where she lived. What he would say. What she would say to him. He enjoyed small fantasies and walked with new purpose.

It was well after three, and the low roofs, the cobbled streets of Milhous were in the shadow of the Work. The rain had left the town smelling clean. Pop was in his room, the wheelchair pulled to a table and his maps. The paper shades were drawn, the wicks turned high. Charts covered the walls depicting the density of lizards in the Orocopia Range.

"I've got new thoughts on the Western Ground Gecko," said Pop. "Serious errors have been made. We know less than we think about diversity of diet. Those fuckers will scarf any spider that crawls."

"You eat anything, or just drink?" asked Will.

"Don't start on me, boy."

"Pour me one too, you got anything left."

Pop brought a quarter bottle of gin from under the table. Two glasses

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followed. Will started poking through cabinets for something marginally close to supper.

"You get down before the rain?"

"Quaker's too old to know he's wet."

"Shit. I'm three years older'n him."

"My point exactly."

Pop showed restraint. Will discovered sausage, sliced a piece, and sniffed.

"You get Quaker over here and let *me* talk to him, there won't be any wonder 'bout who gets Hairline and who don't."

"Now you know I'm not about to do that."

"Me and that old fart started topside together. Worked Upper Lip and Nose. Your ma's buried just below Nostril, bless her soul. Right next to Quaker's Sarah. I'd of been Master pointer if I hadn't gone and fell and he knows it. Where you going now?"

"Out back and clean up."

"And then where?"

"I don't know, Pop. Out."

"I thought maybe we'd talk. You know the Chuckwalla's flesh was highly prized by Indians. It can use its thick tail in defensive situations."

"I won't be much late."

"Don't give a fuck if you are. Don't go thinking I do."

He didn't feel he'd have trouble finding the girl. If she lived in Milhous he'd know her. She wasn't a topsider, the green jumpsuit told him that. A carver, then, or a painter. Someone with a craft. Living in Agnew maybe, or Checkers.

He tried Checkers first, and couldn't believe his luck. A topsider he knew who'd got the dizzies named her at once from Will's description. Carrie Deeds. He said the name to himself. It sounded right. She looked like a Carrie Deeds.

At her door he had a brief moment of doubt. Up to now they were comfortably together in his head. She laughed readily and had a fairly agreeable nature. She appeared to smell faintly of cloves. She opened the door and gave him a vague, yet penetrating look. Measured him for some purpose he couldn't guess.

"I'm Will Taypes," he said. "I saw you this afternoon. You came out of Tunnel 9."

"I didn't see you."

"I know. I was wondering if you'd like to go out."

"No."

"What?"

"No, I wouldn't like to go out." She laughed. It seemed pleasant and

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not demeaning at all. "I'm sorry. Didn't anyone ever turn you down before?"

"Well, sure."

"But not much."

"What's that got to do with us?"

"Listen, thanks for asking."

"You're not making this real easy."

"I guess you're right. Good night, Will Taypes."

Her image was still clear on the face of the door. He found her quite appealing. He was intrigued by contradiction. There was confidence in her eyes, which were attractively wide-set, yet he felt this masked a certain shy and vulnerable nature. A firm, yet faintly indolent chin. A sense of frailty about her face that concealed an inner strength. Possibly wanton restraint. She had clearly said *no*. But what did that mean in a woman so adept at hiding her feelings from the world?

In the morning he left early and tried to catch her going to work. Waited at Tunnel 9 until the whistle blew for his shift. He was less than pleased with himself. It was not his way to let a woman trouble his sleep. The truth was, Carrie Deeds had kept him awake. He had prowled about, unearthing a cache of Pop's bad gin. Spent some time looking whomper-eyed at a poster of the eight-lined whiptail lizard.

Taft-Hartly was hung over, and several others as well. Annie was entwined with Abel Passage, looking silly. Will snagged them all on the hook of his sullen mood. Told them he could ground them as work hazards, but he'd rather give them the chance to break their necks. All appeared subdued. Will felt better as they ascended. He was sluggish on the ground, heavy and oppressed. On topside, a man was alive. He knew why Pop had taken to drink.

Mornings, the front of the Work was in shadow. The job went quickly until noon, when the sun flared over Head and started pounding white granite in the thin upper air. The fresh cuts of stone mica-bright, the Face hot as a stove. Will worked his crew hard. They cursed behind his back, sweating beer and passion. Will stalked through every hollow, T.H. at his heels, Will chalking burrs and nodulations for further work, fashioning new striations in his mind, crawling from cleft to fissure breathing stone. A finer groove with point and hammer, better delineation with the three-point chisel and the rasp. Will could see it take form, feel the crude chisel hatching, the honeycombing stone, an unfinished sketch from where he stood but something more from far away. Half a mile straight down, five miles off to San Clemente where every tourist took a picture. Clear and sharp from there and even further, past Liddy Point and out to sea. The brows had been brooding black in nature; granite is

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cold and undefined. Will could only capture this dark intense emotion with depth and shadow, with the play of light that changed from one moment to the next. Yet, he was certain he was right. That his brow lived and breathed. That Mink had no feeling for the Work. You could look in Mink's eye and see it plain. If he wasn't too addled or disconnected, Quaker could see it too. If he came to some decision before they started feeding him coffee with a spoon.

As if the thought had brought him to life, Will looked up and saw Mink. He sat in his sling some thirty yards away, following the feverish activity of Will's crew. Will displayed a finger. Mink would tell Quaker, who disliked perverse behavior of any sort.

He left an hour early, turning the reins over to T.H., certain this was a sign that his mind was mushy as Quaker's. If she left Tunnel 9 he didn't see her. He couldn't go to her house again. Home seemed a bad idea. Pop was out of sorts. During periods of irritation, he tended to piss on Will's socks and extra shirts. Barring that, there was gin and lizard lore. Leaving the work tunnels he started walking, taking the long road past the five-story collonaded Base. Took his time and gave a craftsman's admiring eye to the great wall of stones, slick as glass, each fashioned so carefully to the next that, like the Work far above, there was no room for the thinnest blade between. The walk took an hour. Shadow said it was likely past six. He bought a cold drink and watched tourists. Black women from King, stately and thin as wires. A green Duesenberg hitched to six matched geldings. Arabs sat in back, feeding chocolates to small Apache boys. Will found the sight faintly disturbing.

Pop was drunk in his chair. A balsa-wood Gila was half complete. Will made supper, avoiding kitchen sounds. Drinking coffee out back and watching clouds play over the heights. Weather moved swiftly above Shoulder. He felt a surprising sense of relief, a lightness of the spirit that seemed wholly without reason. He realized he'd come to some decision about the girl. He'd decided not to look for her again. There were other women he wouldn't have to chase. He'd see her somewhere, but he would bring resolution into play. Stand up against her disturbing sense of motion. Forget soft distraction.

"I get supper or what?" Pop called from inside. "You here or out ruttin' around?"

Will spooned hash from the stove and brought coffee. Pop looked unsteady, erratic about the eyes. He poked food carefully with his fork, maybe looking for mines.

"I don't like the idea of being buried someplace I didn't work. 'Course that's what happens if you're fool enough to wind up a cripple. My mamma's in Lapel, and papa's close by in Knot-of-the-Tie. His pa's in

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Coat Button Four. My great-grandad fell from Herringbone Bend at eighty-six. Used to listen to his tales. He clearly recalled several electrical appliances. Your mother's people were prominent in the Crotch. That's sometime back, and she couldn't recall names. There was some kind of scandal, but I can't say what it was. One thing's certain, we go back on both sides down to Shoe."

"There's more of this hash."

"Be lucky to keep down what I got."

Will dreamed he could see through the Work. It seemed as if stone had turned to glass. He could see every person inside. Multitudes and throngs. Legions of prone bodies facing west. The sun came up in sweet fury and set the Work afire. He saw that each body was interlinked. A tracery of veins carried blood throughout the Work. The Work moved, took a ponderous step toward the sea. Will woke and guessed he'd slept maybe an hour. He was still in his clothes. The sound that roused him came again. The moon painted a window on the floor, and when he opened the door the same waxen light struck her face.

"I couldn't sleep," she said. "I thought we might talk. You look a little surprised."

"I guess that's what I am."

"I wouldn't go out, and you felt that was some kind of rejection."

"I think that's it."

"The truth is, I'm somewhat attracted. I just don't like topsiders who figure they can knock a girl over with their charms."

"I don't recall charming you at all."

"Well. There's that."

He walked along with her through silent streets. Admired the way she moved. The quick determined stride. There was no one about. Shuttered windows, and even the taverns still. At Tunnel 9 she found a lantern. The glow lemoned her eyes. She took his hand without hesitation, a touch that seemed new and yet familiar. He didn't ask where they were going. A cool and steady draft swept through the tunnel, the smell of stone perpetually damp and clean. There were small rooms, lithic indentations on either side, places for folded canvas, scaffolding and tools, paints and other things.

She left the tunnel and led him down a short granite passage, through a wooden door. The space about him seemed hollow and immense. A high vaulted ceiling was revealed. Stone ribbing soared to dizzy heights and disappeared. Carrie Deeds drew him swiftly past fluted marble columns, carved groups, and figures. Will began to find scraps of paper, the notes of student guides.

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crowned in the classical sense . . .

symbolic of naval supremacy and plentiful reign . . .

The vaulted hall gave way to Knight's Chapel. Deep-relief sculptures of great battles and achievement. Elders, counselors, and maidens.

"Over here," Carrie whispered, a sound that fled like quick escaping birds for some time. She made the lamp brighter and held it high. "There. That's what I do. What do you think?"

A hint of challenge in her voice. A frieze done in subtle coloration. Gracious woods, the trunks of massive trees, framing stately homes and folded hills. A spaniel in the old heroic style, rampant on a lawn.

"I like it," said Will. "It's damned good work. I can almost hear that little fella bark." He meant it, and looked right at her as he spoke, knowing this was a woman who would smell idle praise in an instant, would sense any patronizing air and likely hit him with the lantern.

"I just wanted you to see," she told Will. "I wanted you to know what I do." Her words seemed to bridge something between them, words spoken and unsaid as well. She was a carver too, and if topside was a problem, they could end whatever there was right there.

She took him past Early Years, past Piety and Truth stripped to the waist, entwined in marble and quartz. He kissed her before the high bronze gate of Funerary Hall, held her beneath brooding obsidian guards. Her breath was sweet, her body firm and yielding at once. He wanted her then, and knew she would come to him gladly. Instead, he gathered the lantern and took her quickly the way they'd come. She seemed to understand. A pulse beat patiently in her throat. She looked composed and yet intent.

Clouds had gathered to mask the moon. The steamhouse was dark, engine-dreams growling back behind. Will roused old Butz out of sleep. Butz was clearly annoyed. He had no authority to raise Express in the middle of the night. Will suggested a costly breed of gin.

"This is crazy," said Carrie Deeds. "This is crazy as it can be." She held to him tightly, her head against his shoulder, fearful of what she'd see yet curious about the ground dropping away at a rapid pace. "I got to prove myself or what? That better not be what I'm doing."

"You don't have to prove a thing. I want you up there with me."

"I asked people about you."

"What did they say?"

"That you're eight to five to get Hair."

"Me or Mink. Odds don't mean a thing to old Quaker. He'll take us on the boat one day, maybe three miles out, then he'll stand there studying on the brows, making me and Mink sweat. If he's constipated bad he'll pick Mink. If he's thinking straight at all he'll choose me. He knows I'm the one ought to get it."

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"You ever think about if he doesn't?"

"No. Not any. Your folks carvers too?"

"Dad is. Mom's dead. Sis is a nun at Our Lady of Pat. That didn't seem the life for me."

"I wouldn't think."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Now don't start that. We're getting along fine."

"So you say."

The elevator trembled to a stop. He led her through a maze of granite blocks. Clouds swept the moon and planes of stone seemed to vanish and reappear. At Hairline he stopped and held back. Newcomers never understood what they would see. Carrie, though, walked boldly ahead, the high night wind sweeping her hair and snapping at her clothes. The earth below was fluid. Chalky ribbons scratched the sea.

"Lord," she said, "I didn't even imagine."

She didn't speak as he took her hand and guided her to the webbing. Snapping a safety line about his waist, he linked a shorter rope to hers. Before, he might have asked, told her how it would be. He knew, now, she would never make the descent to impress him, or show him that she could. She would do it because this was what she wanted, what she'd decided to do. She stayed close beside him on the webbing, making the fifty yards without looking above or below, the wind whipping sharply about her. Forehead seemed the curve of another moon, a luminous world fleeing in the night.

When it was over, she turned to him and smiled. A mix of emotions. Daring and hesitation. Wonder, an honest touch of fear.

"You do this every day?"

"Like falling off a log."

"I won't say you've got a way with words."

She gripped his hand as he moved from the webbing to a smooth granite fissure, a brooding hollow near the thickest point of the brow. The wind seemed to die. She rested in his arms. When he kissed her, she brought her hand between them, found the zipper at her neck. He looked into her eyes, saw bold and wicked purpose. Her skin was uncanny, another shade of moon and granite. Her features seemed lost in gentle confusion. He drew his strength from the rock itself, from the spirit of the Work. When the sweet rage consumed him, he felt as if a great stone heart beat from below. She sighed, and seemed much smaller than before. Ragged cloud tangled in her hair. He shuddered at the wonder of what had occurred. Bracing his hands on frigid granite, he saw past her to the night. The moon rippled the earth. The sea mirrored the sky. The lights of houses and small towns winked here and there, distorted by the wind.

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"Come back down here," she said, "I'm cold."

He leaned against her to give her warmth.

"I think you've turned my head, Will Taypes."

"I'm doing the best I can."

"You're doing pretty good."

In the unnatural light, he could see far to the north, to the towers of Traitors' Gate, the L.A. Wall that stretched forever, and behind it nothing but dark. The Work was all there was.

"My father's obsessed with lizards. I think you ought to know."

"I can live with that. What else?"

"I don't ask a lot."

"Good. I won't do just anything you want."

"I'm not surprised to hear it."

"I'm guessing we'll get along." ●

SCIENCE FICTION

Meadow was never our metaphor.
Sky and the circling stars,
The meter of Venus and slow Mars,
The spangles of lofty Heaven's core

All spoke their poems into our ears.
We listened and rode the good ship
Wonder. All through the trip
The clanking of the shifting gears

Were haiku, sonnets, sestinas, rhyme.
We lived the poetry of space and of time.

—Jane Yolen

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1.

They found him in a tranktank in an abandoned fugue parlor above a shopping plaza in the east end of the city.

He was very close to death. The intravenous feed had run out of nutrients days before, although it was still delivering a steady drip of the fugue drug.

"Memspan," said the police officer who found him in the tank.

"Yeah," said his partner, gazing down at the old man floating in the saline solution. He was painfully thin, and his gray hair was coming out in clumps. His eyes were wide open, the eyeballs flickering rapidly back and forth, but they were not focused on her or on anything else in the room. His expression was unmistakably blissful.

It was, she thought, a pity to have to disturb him. "Wonder where he is," she said. "Someplace warm, maybe."

Out on the street it was minus ten Celsius. Just thinking about going back out there made her shiver. A vacation in the sun would have been nice, but the wages paid by Securiforce, the vehemently non-union police franchise operator for the City of Boston, did not allow for such luxuries.

"Wherever he is," the first officer said, "I don't think he's coming back."

2.

The neurologist at the city hospital expressed much the same opinion.

"Physically, he's out of immediate danger," he told Findlay, as they watched the SecTech medics lift the old man onto the stretcher for transfer to the company's private hospital across the river in Cambridge. "But otherwise I've got to say it doesn't look good. He's metabolized every drop of the drug, and yet he's still in fugue."

"When will he come out of it?" Findlay asked.

"I don't think he will," the neurologist said. "It just doesn't happen, not in cases this far advanced. We've seen half a dozen like him just in the past year, some of them a lot younger than him. They go under for longer and longer periods, and one day they go in so deep they never find their way back. Even four or five days can do it. And we think Mr. Lerner has been under at least two weeks."

"Maybe closer to three," Findlay said. "But we'll bring him back. He won't get away from us this easily."

3.

As head of contract search services for SecTech International, Findlay had assumed personal charge of the search for the company's missing senior vice president, Arnold Lerner.

Suspecting a bodysnatch, perhaps for ransom, more likely for the intricate contents of Lerner's brain, he had searched for the lost scientist

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in ever-widening circles, tracking airline passenger lists and auto rentals, monitoring surveillance vidcam feeds in banks and airports, tapping the phone lines of corporate rivals, mobilizing intelligence gathering programs across three continents.

It had been a serious error of judgment, almost a fatal one.

In the end it had not been their elaborate search protocols that had found Lerner, but the most plodding sort of police work: a routine search of abandoned premises within a twenty klick radius of Lerner's laboratory, commissioned almost as an afterthought from the local police franchise operator, had turned up the scientist's unlikely hiding place.

Findlay found the whole affair professionally insulting.

"We should have predicted it," he told his assistant, Chambers. "Should have seen it in his profile. There should have been some indication he would pull something like this."

"We don't write the profiles," Chambers pointed out. "We just read them. If it isn't there, it isn't there. We couldn't know that he wanted to take himself out."

"Somehow he got into his files," Findlay said, "and removed any hint that he would do something like this."

"Well, he's the programming wiz, right?"

"Right," Findlay said.

4.

Arnold Lerner was fifty-seven years old. Divorced ten years ago from his second wife, he lived alone in a waterfront condo. There had been no children from either marriage.

Lerner had joined SecTech as its head of research and development fifteen years before, persuaded to give up his tenured university position by a combination of equity and cash. He was, in fact, the pillar on which the company had been built as a high tech boutique servicing the high security industry.

He was a designer of expert search systems. Rapidly synthesizing vast amounts of data from diverse inputs—police reports, electronic funds transfers, phone bills, CableNet subscriptions, newsfax articles, vidcam feeds, virtually any kind of information that moved electronically and which could be accessed—his systems built up a map on which almost any individual's movements could be traced and monitored.

SecTech used Lerner's designs to provide both search services and complete turnkey systems to police forces, governments and private clients around the world.

There were others who designed similar systems. But Lerner, even as he slumped past middle age, was still widely regarded as the very best. He was a very valuable piece of property.

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Right up until his disappearance, Lerner had been regarded as a loyal servant of the corporation.

5.

Chambers briefed Findlay on the fugue parlor.

"Word on the street is that it was a pretty standard operation," he said. "At least until the end. Tanks by the hour, and the usual chemical supports. Businessman's trips rather than long-term stuff, two or three hours at most. Opened in the fall, closed up about a month ago. Nobody thought anything of it. These parlors are always moving about. The police will tolerate them up to a certain point, but they won't tolerate them indefinitely. Although the police have nothing on file about this one. It's like it never existed at all."

"Lerner could have fixed that, too," Findlay said. "We know who ran it?"

"A guy known around here as Donald Travis. Known to police under a dozen akas."

"Organization man?"

"An independent, apparently. Strictly small biz, moving into new market niches ahead of the crowd. And fugue parlors are still pretty new. That'll change of course. The organizations are already involved at the supply end, and I'm sure they're looking at some vertical integration."

Travis had opened a new fugue parlor across town. The premises had been raided that morning.

"No Travis," Chambers said, "but you should have seen who was in the tanks."

He named a leading vidqueen, several minor politicians, and the head of a major merchant bank.

"Wonder what they're escaping from," Findlay said.

"Oh, I don't know that they're escaping," Chambers said. "Seems to me more like a short vacation."

"Not for Lerner," Findlay said. "He tried to emigrate."

6.

They picked up Travis at Madrid airport, where he was about to embark on the EuroHOTOL flight for Sky City. He was carrying a suitcase full of hard cash, no doubt intended for deposit in one of the orbital skybanks. Madrid customs were notoriously lax in enforcing currency export regulations.

"He bought me out," Travis explained. "The tank, the supplies, the lease. Lock, stock, and barrel. What he did with it was his business."

"He used it to orchestrate his own suicide," Findlay said. "That makes you an accessory to attempted murder."

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"Matter of definition," Travis said. "He never told me what he was going to do, not in so many words."

Facing major criminal charges, Travis nonetheless cooperated to the best of his abilities.

Lerner, he told Findlay, had been an occasional client for some years, in a number of locations. An hour here, two hours there, never longer. "Always paid cash. Most people do, actually, even though we take major chips."

"Where did he go?" Findlay asked. "Under the drug?"

"Never told me," Travis said. "Some people talk about it, some don't. He wasn't a talker. I prefer that, actually. You've no idea how boring some people can be. Give them the chance to go anywhere, remember anything, imagine the most fantastic stuff, and where do they go? Back to suck mommy's titty. Back to feel up their first grade teacher."

"They remember doing that?"

"They remember the teacher," Travis said. "They imagine the rest of it. The fugue isn't just remembering, it's imagining, too, imagining how it might have been and making it happen that way. You call the shots. Remember anything, and remember it better than it really was. Dynamite stuff. Or so they say, I don't touch it myself."

"They always go back to childhood?"

"Oh, no," Travis said. "That was just for example. Got a lot who go back to kill their ex-wives, or else to try and make up with them. Got people who want to remember the best meal they ever ate, or the best lay. I mean, you name it, we got it. But a lot of it is real boring and mostly I try not to listen to it."

"You must have wondered," Findlay persisted. "A guy asks you to set him up for a fugue that would never end, you must have wondered what he wanted to remember so bad."

"Not me," Travis said. "I don't wonder about this stuff at all."

"Take a shot."

Travis shrugged. "He was unhappy with his life. He wanted to change it. Change something he did, or some decision he made."

"But what's the use of that?" Findlay asked. "It's not for real, it doesn't really change anything."

"It does if you don't come back," Travis said.

He seemed about to say something else, then hesitated.

"Another pearl of wisdom?"

"There are those who say it does change things," Travis said. "Even if you do come back. They say you really do travel in time and that you really can change things if you try hard enough. Remember something hard enough and it becomes true. Except that you may not know what

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you've done, because when you come out of the fugue it seems that things were always the way they are now."

"That's crazy," Findlay said.

"I didn't say I believed it," Travis said. "I just said, some people say that."

8.

"Tell me about Memspan," Findlay said.

"It's a sad story," Chambers said. "Very sad. It's a biosynthetic, developed by one of the big pharmaceutical companies as an over-the-counter memory aid. They sank millions into it. Memspan was going to be the brand name, except that it never did go on sale. Not legally, anyway."

He showed Findlay a diagram with two nearly identical chemical structures laid out side-by-side.

"It was supposed to be an analog of calpain, that's the one on the left. Calpain is an enzyme produced in the brain by excitation of the synapses. It appears to attack the protein skeleton encrusting the nerve cell membranes. It exposes buried receptors, and in some cases stimulates nerve cells to sprout new branches. The idea was that Memspan, by mimicking this action, would help people in encoding short-term memories. That would have been very helpful in Alzheimer's disease, but it could also have been a big commercial property, too, for students studying for exams and like that. That was the theory, anyway."

"And in practice, what?"

"In practice, they couldn't get the biosynthesis quite right."

He pointed to the second half of the picture.

"Looks pretty close, right? But it's not an exact analog of calpain. It has several additional radicals which they couldn't splice away. And when they tested it, it didn't do what it was supposed to. Instead of assisting short-term memory, it stimulated recall of long-term memory. And the higher the dosage, the stronger the recall. When they gave people high enough doses, under conditions of sensory deprivation, it created a full-blown hallucination in which the subject could relive scenes from the past in every detail.

"Well, they thought they might be on to something all the same. A lot of people would like to remember their past better. And maybe psychotherapists could use it, too, to help patients recall buried traumas. But there was a kicker."

"It doesn't just jog your memories of the past," Findlay said. "It lets you rewrite them."

"Right," Chambers said. "You can use it to create false memories that are almost indistinguishable from real ones. Which made it a lot of fun.

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The pharmaceutical company didn't know what the hell to do with it, but some of the researchers did. They started to give it to their friends, and it spread out from there. It isn't hard to bootleg when you know the formula. But then they started getting reports on the effects of long-term use, and the government banned the stuff."

"What about Lerner?" Findlay asked. "Did you find any way to bring him back?"

"It's never been done," Chambers said. "But I think I may have a lead. It was in one of the early research studies. Fugue riders."

"Fugue what?"

"It was one of those studies testing it out with psychiatric patients, working through buried traumas. But the interesting part was, the therapist went in with them, shared the same fugue, helped them along."

"How?"

"Some kind of computer-mediated link, an artificial telepathy."

"Is that possible?" Findlay asked.

"I don't know," Chambers said. "I talked to some other Memspan researchers and they think it's a crock."

"But they don't have anything better to suggest?"

"No," Chambers said. "They don't."

9.

"As I told you on the vidlink," Dr. Brandon said, "I really don't think we can help you."

Dr. Ruth Brandon was a tall woman in her early forties. She had a mane of dark hair showing the first streaks of gray. She was wearing blue lab overalls with a stripe over the front pocket which read "Director."

She was director of the Hartley Mind Frontiers Research Center, a small private research facility in San Diego funded by the Hartley Mind Frontiers Foundation. The Foundation, in turn, had been established ten years before by bequest of the late Joseph Hartley, an heir to old California aerospace money, and something of an eccentric. The Hartley Mind Frontiers Foundation had been his final eccentricity.

"From what you've told me about the case," Dr. Brandon said, "and from my own limited knowledge of the area, it sounds hopeless."

"We think you can help," Findlay said.

"Memspan is not our field of study at all," she said. "Our focus is on the mind-to-mind link. Certain drugs facilitate that link, we're not quite sure how. We think they lower the conscious mind's resistance to accepting the communication."

"And Memspan is one of them?"

"Yes," she said. "We received a small research grant from the developer, when they were still looking for ways to market it, to test it out

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as a therapeutic tool. It didn't work, of course, the fantasy element occluded the real buried memories. But the drug itself was never our real concern. We don't work with it anymore. And we never tried anything like what you're proposing."

"Our information is that you were able to do it. To ride the fugue."

"In some cases, yes," she said. "But only for a few hours at most, going in from the first moment of the fugue. That's very different from attempting to enter a long-established fugue pattern. But the point is, it's simply not our interest here."

"Your interest is the telepathy itself, right?" Findlay said.

"We don't use that word here, Mr. Findlay," she said, giving him a weary smile. "We deal in the transmission of electrical impulses, in computer-mediated representations of neural information. And we avoid placing any more sensationalistic interpretation upon it. We've had too many problems with it in the past. The media pick up on it, and it doesn't help our credibility in the scientific community."

"They think you're a flake," Findlay said.

"There is some skepticism about our activities, yes."

"Which doesn't help in funding your research."

"We would always like to do more," she said. "But we are adequately provided for by our Foundation."

"That's not what I hear," Findlay said. "I hear that your Foundation has made some rather bad investment decisions. I hear that your budget has been cut twice in the past two years."

"I don't have to comment on that," she said, "since the Foundation's affairs are private, and there is no legal way in which you could have access to that information. What is your point, Mr. Findlay?"

"I don't think you need your machine to read my mind."

10.

"You must want him back very badly," Dr. Brandon told Findlay, as they looked at the man in the bed.

"Matter of principle," Findlay said. "SecTech, we find people. It's our business. We don't lose them."

"Even if I bring him back," she said, "you can't force him to go back to work for you."

"That part of it," Findlay said, "isn't my problem. My expertise is finding them. We have other people to put him back together."

"All the king's horses," she said.

She turned Lerner's head on the pillow and inspected the jack which had been surgically inserted on her instructions behind his right ear.

"Looks all right," she said."Let's plug him in."

She picked up a lead from the machine beside Lerner's bed and plugged

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it into Lerner. She turned on the monitor, scanned the readouts. The EEG lines showed the familiar sawtooth fugue pattern.

"Coming through," she said. "Let's get on with this."

She crossed to the bed next to Lerner's and sat down upon it. She lifted up the hair over her right ear and plugged a second lead from the machine into her own jack. She lay down on the bed.

"Memspan," she said. "Minimum dosage."

A technician injected her with the fugue drug.

She stared for a moment at the gray ceiling of the room. And then she closed her eyes. "And here we go," she said.

11.

The familiar dark tunnel opened up, and she dived into it, dived for the flickering bright lights below, dived into a synesthetic bath of images and tastes and sounds. And then the program began to decode the information racing from Lerner's neural nets to her own, and she was seeing what he was seeing, hearing what he was hearing, feeling what he was feeling. . . .

Heat, dust, noise. A feeling of enormous exhilaration.

He was standing out in the open country somewhere, surrounded by a clutter of machinery, by crowds of people. He was holding a woman's hand and staring up into the sky, blinking his eyes against a blinding flash of light.

One of those old nuke tests? She had time to wonder, as the landscape was flooded with flickering, stroboscopic shadow bands of black and white. And then the shadows vanished as quickly as they had come, and the people around him began to cheer and applaud, and an immense wave of darkness rushed off toward the horizon.

She felt his excitement giving way to an intense disappointment. He was still holding the woman's hand. She was staring off at the black wall moving away from them. He looked toward her for a moment, began to frame a word with his lips, "Martha, I . . ." he was going to say, except he did not say it. And then the picture dissolved and they were falling, the man and his rider, falling through the darkness studded with flares of color, falling back toward the beginning . . .

12.

Which was in a small outdoor cafe in a crowded market square, with the night coming down.

The Mexican night, she thought, suddenly, not sure whether she was recognizing it from her travels or picking it up from the subject; sometimes it was hard to tell.

It had been Mexico, too, she realized now, in that fleeting previous

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scene, that strange riot of light and shadow, southern Mexico. Except that the previous scene had yet to occur, this was somehow the prelude to it.

He was a young man in this time and place. She could feel the strength of his body, the quickness of his thoughts, the force of his sexuality.

He was not aware of her presence in his mind. He was far too deep into his fugue, far too preoccupied with the scene that was unwinding for him, that he was unwinding for himself.

He sat alone at a table drinking tequila. He was here in this town with friends, or workmates, but they had gone off somewhere—a brothel across town, perhaps—and he had declined to accompany them, he no longer remembered why, except that he wanted to sit here alone and watch the people, and listen to the strolling musicians and wait for *her*.

He remembered her long white peasant dress, the flash of long sun-browned legs, dark eyes that burned right through him, bored through into his inner being. . . . And later, how she would move against him in his hotel room above the square, the carnival-like celebrations of the gathering crowds of Indians below feeding their own excitement.

Celebrations of what, Brandon wondered? Something very big, and yet she could not quite get a hold of it, his thoughts of the woman he would meet were getting in the way. Something about the sun . . .

It was the same woman who had been with him, out in that field, holding hands and watching the sky, except that he had not met her yet. This was obviously an old memory and a well-loved one, often revisited. And, no doubt, reworked, polished, made more perfect still.

Brandon could not match the face against any of the photos Findlay had provided her; she was not one of Lerner's known wives or girlfriends or colleagues or acquaintances. Of course, he could have forgotten what she really looked like, or idealized her image. Almost certainly he had done both over the years, at least to some degree.

And it was possible, too, that he had simply invented her, although Brandon doubted it. The level of detail was much greater in real memories than fabricated ones, you could spot the differences after a while. This one, with the dead fly floating in his tequila and the dust at the back of his throat, appeared real, real in its origins at least.

Real or not, was this what Lerner was looking for? Was this what it was all about? Brandon was not surprised. And yet she was disappointed, somehow, disappointed with the essential banality of it all, of this old man obsessively revisiting the scene of some presumably long-lost romance.

Still, as she knew from past experience, it could have been far more distasteful than this.

There was a crumpled *International Herald Tribune* on the table in

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front of him. The month and year were clear, although the day was blurry, he did not remember things quite so precisely. It was March something 1970, and Lerner would have been—what?—twenty-two years old.

There was good reason for him to remember the newspaper; it was an important prop in this scene. In a moment the woman—Martha, that was what he had called her before, or rather, afterward—was standing over his table, looking down at him, frowning over the headlines, asking if she could borrow it. And then she was sitting at his table, and they were talking about the war—would that have been the Gulf War, Brandon wondered? No, the Vietnam one—and the bombings, and the protests, and his draft deferment, and whether he would go to Canada if it came to it . . .

Despite the clothes she was an American and a student like himself, studying philosophy at UCLA. In other ways she was different, very different, she cared about different things or at least cared about them more intensely.

This war, for example. He was against it, of course, he had signed the petitions and attended the demonstrations, he thought it was wrong and he was sure it could not be won. But in all this he felt himself largely an onlooker, it did not really engage him, not the way science engaged him, he was at best an occasional foot soldier in the armies of protest. Whereas the woman—Martha Danning, that was how she introduced herself—the woman was one of the generals, a veteran of activities both legal and illegal, he was not sure he wanted to hear quite how illegal. And she spoke not merely of stopping the war but of bringing down the government itself, of constructing a new kind of society.

"Revolution," she said. "It's coming down, real soon now."

He had known people like her back home, of course, the hard-core militants, the old SDS types, the ones who spoke knowingly of Bernadine and Jeff and Jane, and usually he avoided them. And if he had met Martha back home, he might have avoided her—and surely she would have had just as little time for him.

But as they talked he realized that she was not like them, not really. She talked to him rather than at him, she talked about the war and the government and the corporations, about the role of the universities in military research, about the implications of his own research interest in the dawning field of artificial intelligence. She was soft and she was quiet and she was almost persuasive.

He was not at home, in any case, and neither was she. Actually, she was here for the same reason he was, she shared the same excitement about what would happen the next day. She had been in this little Mexican town—in Miahuatlan, that was what she called it—for two days.

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"I'm with the MIT team," he said. "Who are you with?"

"Team?" she said. "I came here by myself."

There was, then, another side to her, a side which had prompted her to drop everything, her organizing work as well as her much-neglected studies, and come here, despite the criticism she would face on her return. And it was this side that called to him, somehow, even though he would have disapproved of it in himself.

"Fritz will kill me," she said.

Fritz was one of her housemates back in Berkeley and one of her comrades in the revolution, and also, perhaps—he did not push this point closely—her lover, or one of her lovers. But in any case she did not, as she told him at one point in their conversation, believe in monogamy, it was one more doomed institution, like the Congress and the Supreme Court and the Pentagon.

And so they talked on and on, and drank, and danced, and afterward climbed the stairs to his room above the square and lay down upon the scratchy blanket on his narrow bed, as the music continued to play and the excitement of the Indians bubbled up from the square as if to feed their own.

12.

"Martha Danning," Brandon said, as she pulled out the lead and sat up in bed. "A student at UCLA, philosophy, early seventies. Radical type, she may be on file somewhere. That's who he's looking for, back there."

"They met where?" Chambers asked, taking notes.

"Some small town in southern Mexico, Miahuatlan. March 1970, that's when he remembers it, although he could be off. He was down there with some kind of research team, MIT, I don't know what for. At first I thought it was some kind of nuclear test, but it doesn't fit with the rest."

"I'll check it out," Chambers said. "Did you make contact with him?"

"No," she said. "I want to get the pattern first."

"Are you going back under?"

"Tomorrow," she said. She rubbed her eyes. "He may not need to sleep, but I do."

13.

Beside the road on the cab ride from the airport, lush jungle, a glimpse of a frightened zebra.

He recognized some faces in the hotel bar, joined their conversation, arranged a ride to the northern outback. But he was no longer one of them, he was here strictly as a tourist this time around.

In his room, the date on the complimentary copy of the *Kenyan Gazette* was June something 1973.

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A series of rapid, impatient transitions. Riding in the back of a bumpy truck. Wrestling equipment across a dusty plain. Sipping dusty lukewarm water from a flask. Looking around him rather than up as the shadows begin to strobe, looking for her . . .

She was not here, he was not here, he would not be in Kenya for another ten years and he would never venture into these northern wastelands. Neither of them were ever here, it all fell apart on him, and he was plunging back through the dark that flashed with lights, plunging back to the beginning.

14.

And again the square, the strolling musicians, the newspaper on the table. Except that this time he was rushing through the details rather than savoring them. They talked, they drank, they danced, they went up to his room, they made love, they talked more.

". . . look at it," he was saying, and now the film was gearing down to normal speed, there was something in this exchange he wanted to hear or to change. "You can't look at the eclipse directly."

Eclipse, Brandon thought. A total eclipse. That was what was going to happen to the sun here, tomorrow. And later, no doubt, in Kenya.

"Bullshit," Martha said. "I can't believe you're saying that. That's not science, that's propaganda. Sure, you can't look at the sun without protection during the partial phase. Even with only a small part of the sun still in view, you would still be looking at ordinary sunlight . . . and that can damage your eyes, no question. But during the total phase the corona can't hurt you. You've just got to know when to look. Watch the Indians tomorrow, they're going to look for sure."

"The Mexican government has been warning them not to . . ."

"Governments always do," she said. "They don't like for people to see it directly. Through a dark glass, maybe, or better still reflected on a piece of cardboard. But not directly."

"Why not?"

"Because it reminds people of where we're really at. Sitting here on this ball of dirt, locked in this eternal dance with the moon and the sun. It forces us to look beyond ourselves, to see higher laws and goals than our all-wise governments can offer. Basically, an eclipse is a burst of some really righteous revolutionary energy."

"Bullshit," he said. "I mean, I hear it's spectacular. But get right down to it, it's just the moon getting between us and the sun. Like clockwork, really."

"Powerful clockwork," she said. "Remember the ghost dance."

"Ghost what?"

"The last gasp of the old American Indians," she said.

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"The last attempt to drive out the white man. It got started with this total eclipse back in the late 1880s. This old Indian had himself some kind of revelation and started some kind of revolution."

"And that's why you're here?"

"Nah," she said. "I'm here for a good time. But it's a neat symbol. And the corona, boy, you never saw anything like it."

"You've seen a total eclipse before?"

"Oh yeah," she said. "This is my third. I'm what you might call an eclipse buff. I remember watching the first one with my daddy in our backyard when I was just a little kid. The way he explained it before, I thought it was going to be scary, you know, the sun going out. I thought I'd be dying for it to come back, and afraid that somehow it wouldn't. But when it happened, it wasn't scary at all. It was a high, a natural high. Full of strangeness and beauty. And I didn't want it to end. You know sometimes . . ."

"Sometimes what?"

"Sometimes I dream that there's an eclipse and it does never end. It just goes on and on. Like I'm freeze-drying the moment. I know it's never going to end, and I feel this amazing happiness inside me. And then . . ."

"What?"

She shrugged. "Then I wake up."

15.

"We checked it out," Findlay said, as she unjacked. "He was down in Mexico for an eclipse, they were taking some kind of measurements. Basically he was there as a schlepper, helping out with the equipment."

"And the woman?" Brandon asked, getting up from the bed.

"We don't figure her anywhere in his life," Findlay said. "No old letters, photos, anything like that. But there was a Martha Danning, a radical type like you said. She was under surveillance, too, but we can't place her in Mexico then or later. Of course, surveillance back then was a lot sloppier. Also, we tracked down this old geezer who was on the same team and he did remember Lerner making out with some radical-hippy type down there. So it does fit, sort of, except that it would have been a pretty minor thing in his life."

He handed over a grainy black-and-white photo. Lerner, Brandon saw, had remembered her well enough.

"Who's to say what's minor?" she asked. "And what do you mean, there was a Martha Danning?"

"She checked out nearly thirty years ago," Findlay said, and Brandon felt a surprising pang of regret. She had liked Martha. There had been something elemental about her, her energy, her anger, her appetite for life. It was hard to imagine her being dust for so long.

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"How?"

"There was a war, back then, and she was against it, against almost everything you could mention actually. And the war got even uglier and the protests got so bad the government was shooting at the kids back home. And she dropped out of school, and she joined some kind of cockamamie underground group, and she disappeared for years until eventually she got herself shot in some kind of fucked-up bank raid."

"And Lerner never saw her again, after Miahuatlan?"

"Not that we can track. He went back to the school, he got his doctorate, he got married for the first time, he got a professorship, he got research contracts, all good solid citizen stuff. Well, he signed a petition or two, but he cut that out after a while, got cleared for military AI research. No way she seems to have changed his life at all."

"Maybe that was the problem," Brandon said. "That she didn't change his life. Or rather, that he didn't."

"Why should he have?" Findlay asked. "Based on what? They met, they had sex, and that was it. End of story."

"Except it wasn't."

"You figure that's what he's doing in there?" Findlay asked, nodding toward Lerner. "Chasing a piece of tail across thirty years?"

"I think it's more than that," Brandon said. "I think he's trying to stop the sun."

16.

They were eating breakfast out on the square, bread and jam and muddy coffee.

She crossed the square toward them.

"Hello," she said, sitting down at their table. "Do you mind if I join you?"

They looked up at her, startled. In Lerner's case, more than startled. He looked terribly confused, and then afraid.

"I'm Ruth Brandon," she said, holding out her hand to shake. She noted with amusement that her hand was unlined, the hand of a twenty-year-old. An idealized self-projection. Or was it merely protective camouflage, an attempt to blend into this younger world?

Lerner did not take her hand, sat staring at it.

"You don't know me," she said. "I'm nowhere in your memory. You're not doing this. I am."

"What . . ." he began. "How . . ."

"You're in fugue, Lerner," she said. "You're in so deep you've forgotten how far. And I've come to bring you back again."

"Go away," he said. "Just go away."

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Her hand, still held out toward him, vanished. She felt her body becoming transparent.

She fought back, forcing her body to solidify, restoring her hand.

"No," she said. "This isn't your fugue anymore. It's *ours*. And I'm as strong as you are. Maybe stronger."

She snapped her finger in his face and their table was surrounded by a heavily armed police SWAT team, circa 1970.

"Shall I have them take her away now?" she asked. "They may not want her yet, but they will want her soon."

Martha, confused, panicky, shrank back in her chair. Her features, Brandon noticed, were becoming blurry, as though Lerner was losing his grip on this scene.

"Or shall we talk?" Brandon asked, flicking the SWAT team out of existence.

"Go away," he said again. "Will you please just go away? We have nothing to talk about."

Now the Danning woman came back into definition. She leaned forward in her chair.

"What's happening, Arnold?" she asked Lerner. "Who is this woman? How did she do that? And what's a fugue?"

Lerner looked at Brandon. She shook her head. "That's not me. It's you. Or it's her acting out the characteristics you've attributed to her."

"It's . . . a memory," he told Martha, unwillingly. "A drug-induced memory. My memory of you, and this place, and this time. This woman has somehow entered my fugue."

"I don't feel like a memory," Martha said. "I feel real."

"You are," Lerner told her. "Now."

He looked at his watch.

"The partial is starting in half an hour. We have to get going."

He got up from the table. Martha got up, too.

"I'm sorry," he told Brandon. "I'm not coming back. I'm not finished yet."

He put his arm around Martha and they walked off across the dusty square.

17.

It was a hot, cloudless morning. The streets of the town were crowded with thousands of Indians from the neighboring area, here to celebrate the eclipse, and hundreds of whites, members of the various scientific expeditions come here to observe it and measure it.

Brandon followed Lerner and Martha to an encampment on a hill in the desert just outside the town. Here members of his team were already

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scurrying about their business. An older white man chided Lerner for his lateness, looked at Martha with a mixture of lust and contempt.

Martha hung back at the edge of the camp as Lerner joined in making the final adjustments to the equipment.

"Do you mind if I watch with you?" Brandon asked.

"No," Martha said. "I suppose not."

Clearly, though, Martha was uncomfortable with her presence, with what it signified. As if to calm herself she rummaged in her purse, which was large and made of a crudely finished leather. She produced a sheaf of photographic negatives, stacked three together and handed them over to Brandon. "To watch the partial," she told her. "It should be starting soon."

Blinking up at the sun through the naked eye, Brandon could see nothing. But squinting through the exposed film, she could see the moon slowly, slowly biting into the sun.

They watched in silence for a while. Then Martha said, "It's true, isn't it? I'm not real. I'm just a . . . just a memory."

"It's a matter of definition," Brandon said. "Here, you're real. Or at least partially so. For him."

"But I'm not a person," Martha said. "I'm just some kind of phantasm he's called up. That's why . . ."

"Why what?"

"Why this keeps happening over and over again."

Could a memory have a memory? The idea made Brandon dizzy.

"He's going to try and stop the sun," Martha said. "Again."

"I know," Brandon said.

Lerner had stopped working and was staring toward them. As he met Brandon's glance he looked away.

"Why?" Martha asked. "Why is he doing this?"

"I don't know," Brandon said. "Maybe because he was never so alive as he is today. Maybe because you asked him to. I don't know. I'm not sure he does."

She trailed off. The partial phase was visible now even without the film, although she was careful not to stare directly at the sun. And the light was changing noticeably. She could still see her shadow on the ground, sharp and crisp, and yet the sun's intensity was waning down to a dusk-like gloom. As these changes accelerated, she felt increasingly disoriented.

The moon's shadow swept onward, reducing the sun to a thin crescent. There was a sudden chill in the air. Dogs howled in confusion, birds streamed down to roost in the trees, the people around them chattered with excitement.

Martha left Brandon and walked toward Lerner. The two joined hands

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and stood watching as a wall of darkness loomed in the west, racing toward them. It was the leading edge of the umbra, the cone of shadow that would soon engulf them.

And then there were shouts of amazement, as the landscape was flooded with flickering shadow bands of black and white. It was the same display Brandon had witnessed on first entering Lerner's fugue, at the tail-end of the eclipse. This time, however, she had been briefed, and she knew it for what it was: interference patterns generated by interaction of the light rays from the extreme points of the disappearing solar crescent.

And then, as abruptly as they had come, the shadows ceased. Calm descended upon the hilltop. The sun was now a black disk surrounded by a silvery corona of blazing light. Mercury and Venus shone clearly beside it. The sky was a deep twilight, with a band of light around the horizon.

Totality. People looked from the sky to each other and back to the sky, murmuring softly or not speaking at all, enjoying this strange interval in the cycles of the solar system and in their own lives. Totality.

This is where I came in, Brandon thought. Or almost. In a few minutes there would be a blinding flash of light, followed by an encore performance of the shadow effects. Then the umbra would speed off to the east. Puzzled birds would leave their trees. People would applaud and then go home and go on with their lives. And the sun and the moon and the earth would continue their intricate dance. And Lerner would be disappointed all over again, although surely he would continue with his efforts, return to this scene again and again.

Soon, yes. But not now. For now she could glory under that remembered corona.

18.

Three and a half minutes, that was how long the totality should last, here and now in Miahuatlan in Oaxaca in southern Mexico. Or so she had read in the faded newsprint accounts supplied her by Chambers. Three and a half minutes, except that it would seem like no more than a minute, according to one eyewitness report.

And yet already it seemed like much more than one minute, or three and a half, or even ten. It seemed to stretch on and on. This time, perhaps, Lerner was winning. Or had there been many such partial successes in the past, each one finally eluding him?

Five million dollars. That was what they had already paid her just for trying. Another twenty million if she could bring him back.

Five million meant a lot to the Center. Another twenty million would guarantee its future, independent of its failing Foundation.

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The problem was, she was not convinced she could bring him back. And even if she could, she was no longer sure that she wanted to.

19.

Allowing her projected self to dissolve back into the darkened landscape, she moved back into Lerner's perspective on events.

This time he was aware of her presence immediately. But he was too busy with his efforts to hold the heavens in their place to remark upon it.

"You can't keep this up," she told him.

"Yes I can," he said, after a while. "I'm getting control of it now. I can feel it."

And it was true. The scene was taking on stability, without him continually working to maintain it.

"I can smash it," she said.

"Then I'll do it again," he said, "and again, until you get tired of it and leave me alone. Because I'm not coming back. Understand that. There's nothing there for me, there never was anything there . . ."

He glanced at Martha, who was holding his hand tightly and gazing with rapt attention at the corona.

"This isn't really about Martha," Brandon said. "You barely knew her, and what you knew you've forgotten. You've idealized her, she probably wasn't like this at all."

"You may be right," he said. "But what difference does that make? I remember the important things."

"She died," Brandon said. "A long time ago. Robbing a bank."

"I know that. I knew that. So what? I'm dead too, any way that counts. Sure, it would never have worked, I could never have lived with Martha, not in the real world. I knew that then, I still know it now. And for sure I couldn't have followed her, gone underground, done those bombings, all that stuff. That was never me, although I understood why she did it.

"And in a way she was right, she was right all along. She told me, the machine is killing us, it's out of control, we've got to stop the machine. And I knew she was right. And what did I do? I went to work on building better machines."

"People make choices," Brandon said. "Good ones and bad ones, for good and bad reasons. You can always change them."

"No," he said. "I've run out of choices."

He looked up at the corona blazing above.

"Afterwards, when she left town, she told me, I'll see you at the next one, Kenya in '73. Except I wasn't there, and I'm sure she wasn't either. By then she was already underground, although I didn't know it at the time."

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"You lost touch with her?"

"Right," he said. "I thought of calling, writing, getting on a plane to see her, but I never did any of those things and neither did she. I guess we both knew it was pointless, there was no future in it. So I never did see her again, after this. But I did think about her, and I thought about the corona. I remember in '73, one time I picked up the phone to call the airline about flights to Kenya. My wife was sitting in the next room watching TV—I had just gotten married, just started teaching—but I called. I thought about going, dropping everything and going, but of course I didn't.

"And a few years afterwards, I opened up my newspaper and there she was. A photo from the vidcam inside the bank, just before the shoot-out. She'd cut her hair, she'd gained weight, but I knew it was her, I knew she was dead. And that was when I began to realize that I was, too. A part of me, anyway, the important part."

"Which part was that?" Brandon asked.

"My freedom," he said. "My spontaneity. My joy. All that stuff. That was what died, that was what I killed inside myself. Or so my therapist used to tell me, before I gave up therapy as a waste of time."

"Martha was a symbol of something you felt you had lost?"

"Or never had," he said. "Except very briefly, at times like this. And never after this. I was dead all along, but it took me a long time to realize it. And even then, I kept on going through the motions, I went through a lot of motions. No one seemed to notice. Well, my wife noticed, because she left me in the end, and so did my second wife. But nobody else seemed to see it, or if they did then they just didn't care. Maybe they liked me better that way. And I just went on building better machines."

"What are you going to do?" she asked. "In this frozen world of yours?"

"Do?" he said. "Oh, I don't know. I thought we'd maybe keep watching this for another couple of years. And after that, maybe we'll have lunch and come back and watch some more."

"But surely it's only special because it's so brief," she said. "You'll get bored with it. You'll want to move on."

"No," he said. "I don't think so. It was moving on from here that killed me, and Martha, too. I think we'll be very happy here."

20.

And then he began to lose it. Perhaps he had grown over-confident, perhaps he was distracted, but suddenly the landscape began to waver, and then there was a blinding flash of light.

She felt his despair, even more acute than before, his sense of loss.

"Oh, shit," she said to herself.

And then she reached out into the fugue landscape, poured her energies

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into reshaping it. She held back the shadow of the moon, she rolled it back to its previous position, she fixed it into place.

The effort exhausted her, but the scene appeared stable. Gingerly, she let go.

"Practice," she said. "I think it'll stay now, even after I go. Although I can't promise you it will."

"You could stay, too," he said. "There's plenty of room."

"No," she said. "Not now."

She was in no hurry, though, to go back. She knew that Findlay would not be amused.

And so she lingered for a while within that time and place, basking in the glow of the corona.

21.

She was sitting up in bed and drinking a glass of juice when the alarm buzzer began to sound. She looked at the EEG display on the monitor. As she had somehow expected, the line was flat.

Then the doctors and the nurses surged into the room and injected the man in the bed with adrenalin, and hooked him into a respiration device. But the line remained flat and eventually they gave up.

It was only then that she noticed that the walls in the room were green rather than gray, and that the room itself was longer and narrower than it had been before.

"Where is this place?" she asked the doctor.

"The same place it always was," the doctor said, surprised. "Boston, Massachusetts."

"You moved us?"

"Moved?"

"This isn't the SecTech medcenter?"

"This is the city hospital," he said. "You must still be disoriented. Must have been a terrible thing, having him die on you like that. But we always knew it was a long shot."

She was still musing on that when Findlay came into the room, and took in the scene.

"Too bad," he said.

"Too bad?" she echoed. "That's all you have to say about it?"

He seemed surprised. "What else is there to say? I hardly knew the guy, after all."

"I would have thought SecTech would be pretty upset," she said. "After going to all this trouble."

"SecTech?" he said. "What the hell is SecTech?"

"The people you work for," she said, although she knew now that he didn't.

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"Work for? I work for the police department, Dr. Brandon, you know that. I'm the one who brought you in on this, to see if we could get an ID on this John Doe here, maybe even pull him out of it. Don't you remember?"

"Sure," she said, as the doctor whispered something in Findlay's ear. "Sure I remember."

She got up and pulled back the sheet from Lerner's face. Except that it was not Lerner's face.

She crossed to the window and pulled the blind and looked up the sun. It was a normal winter sun, crisp and brilliant in a diamond-hard sky.

"Oh yes," she said again. "I remember." ●

NEXT ISSUE

Lucius Shepard returns to *IAsfm* next issue with our August cover story, "On The Border," a fast-paced and tough-minded look at a future society where the division between the Haves and the Have-Nots has gotten about as unequivocal and clear-cut as it is possible to get: a wall of force, deadly to the touch, that seals the border between the United States and Mexico. The Border is supposed to be impregnable, impassible, but the outlaw Chapo has other ideas, and a rich woman captive he thinks will be his ticket to the Soft Life... the result is as unexpected and exciting as all of Shepard's work. **Kim Stanley Robinson** is also on hand for our August issue, with his novella "The Blind Geometer," an intense and fascinating tale that immerses us in the very special world of the title character, as he himself becomes ever more deeply entangled in webs of murder, espionage, and love; this is another tour-de-force by Robinson, one of science fiction's most gifted young writers.

Also in August: **Alexander Jablokov** gives us a look at the very peculiar goings-on "At the Cross-Time Jaunter's Ball," as we trace the machinations of a group of immortals who live in the interstices between the many worlds of possibility; **Lisa Goldstein** returns with a sad and funny study of the complications that arise from the possession of a set of "Cassandra's Photographs"; **Steven Popkes** takes us to a strange, haunted planet for the bittersweet story of "The Rose Garden"; **Marc Laidlaw** serves up the Ultimate Cyberpunk Satire in "Nutrimancer," one of the funniest stories we've seen in some time; and last, but certainly not least, our August Viewpoint is brought to us courtesy of the capable hands of Nebula-winner **Gregory Benford,** who gives us a lively and surprising look at "The Future of the Jovian System," a review of upcoming possibilities in space colonization that is chock full of those Crazy Ideas that science fiction is famous for... only some of them may turn out to be not quite as Crazy as you may think. Plus an array of columns and features. Look for the August issue on sale on your newsstands on June 30, 1987.

COMING UP: stories by **Avram Davidson, Harry Turtledove, Howard Waldrop, Ian Watson, Connie Willis, Robert Silverberg, Nancy Kress, Bruce McAllister,** and others, plus **Harlan Ellison's** *I, Robot: The Movie.*

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(continued from page 20)

Sure I could have.

Then, it was off to explore the richly developed world of the Promethean Prophecy.

The initial battle in the game only serves to motivate the actions that follow, namely the exploration of Prometheus Four. The Romulan attack has left the *Enterprise* damaged and without food. The player, as Kirk, must beam down with a landing party to discover a food source to feed his crew.

Once on the planet, an intriguing scenario begins to be played out. The native residents have silvery hair and haunting, glowing eyes. One soon discovers that there are various classes of Prometheans, Defenders, Sustainers, Traders, and Chanters, all of whom seem to go about their task oblivious to the landing party's needs. A great blue city seems to offer hope, but entry can prove difficult.

After exploring the desert area of this class-M planet, the party learns something of Promethean ecology. There are lizard-like creatures who seemingly filter the air for nutrients, and then deposit a golden sphere as a byproduct. The entire planet seems to be controlled by someone or something named the "Afflictor" who inspires a healthy fear in all the Prometheans the party runs across.

While all this exploring is going on, Lieutenant Uhura and Scotty from the *Enterprise* check in with reports of food riots and disconcerting messages from Star Fleet Command. Time is definitely a factor here, and when you pass one hundred moves, the urgency to get food up to your ship can become intense.

The Promethean Prophecy is a text type of adventure, not unlike many on the market. While it is not nearly as innovative as Simon & Schuster's previous release, the *Kobayashi Alternative*, it has a few things that make it well above average fare.

First, the writing and flavor of the adventure is prime "Star Trek." The adventure has the feel of a classic TV episode. It's colorful and intriguing, which is more than most text adventures are. Also, the adventure has its own internal clock. Messages arrive from various places, Spock appears on cue, and certain events take place. The story is dynamic—it doesn't just depend on your actions. Also, the imminent starvation of the *Enterprise*'s crew is excellent motivation to solve the mystery of Prometheus Four.

Though dependent on a good deal of "creative wandering"—going north, south, east, or wherever to find something—*The Promethean Prophecy* delivers, as promised on the game cover, a lost adventure of the *Enterprise*. And, if you find you can't get past the Romulan Bird of Prey, drop me a line here at *IAsfm* and I'll tell you just what you can do with your photon torpedoes. We reviewers know all the tricks. ●

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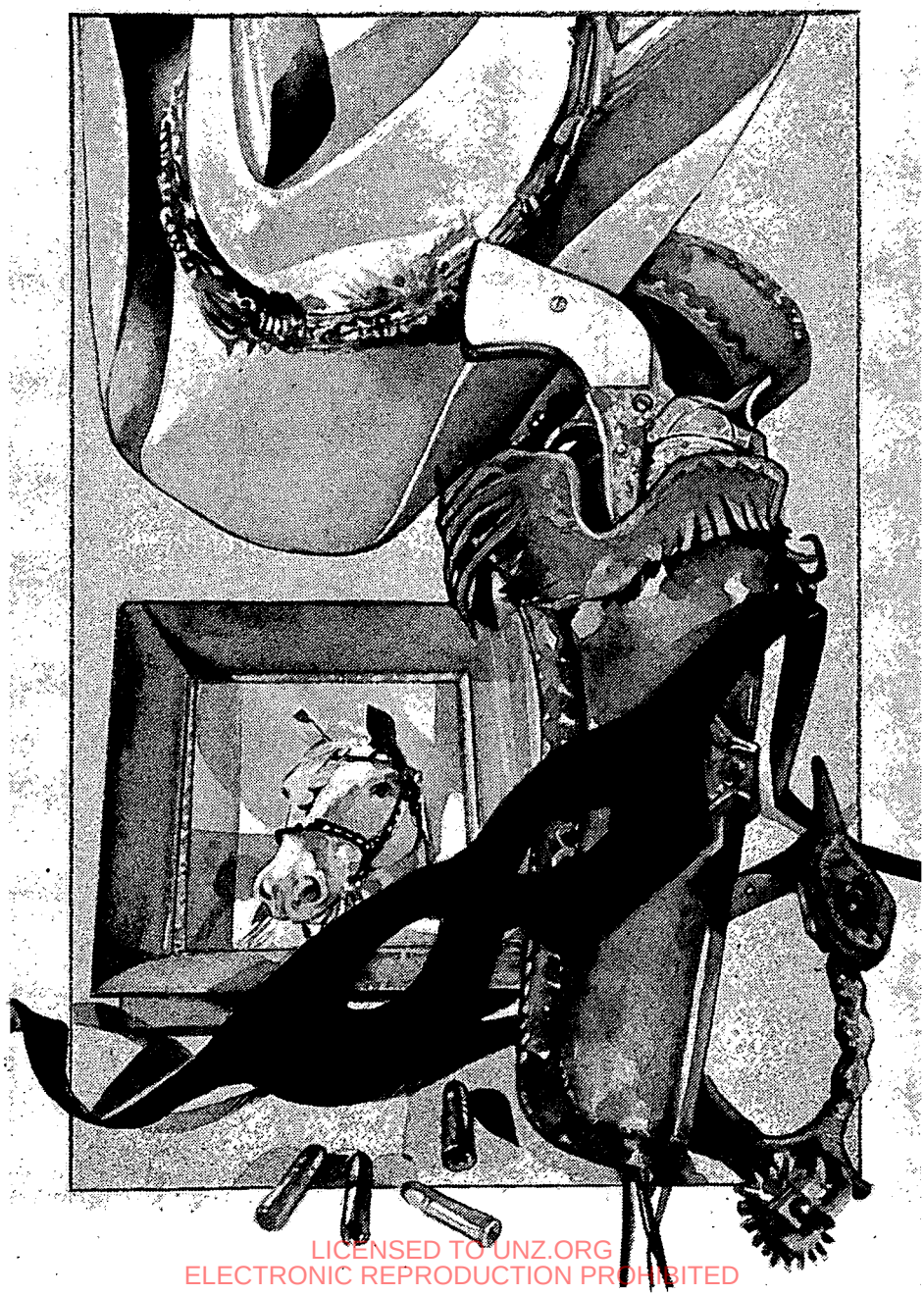

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THE FAITHFUL COMPANION AT FORTY

by Karen Joy Fowler

Karen Joy Fowler's first collection of short stories, *Artificial Things*, was published last year by Bantam Books, and was a finalist for the Philip K. Dick Award for best original paperback. Ms. Fowler is currently working on her first novel.

art: John Lakey

His first reaction is that I just can't deal with the larger theoretical issues. He's got this new insight he wants to call the Displacement Theory and I can't grasp it. Your basic, quiet, practical minority sidekick. The *limited* edition. Kato. Spock. Me. But this is not true.

I still remember the two general theories we were taught on the reservation which purported to explain the movement of history. The first we named the Great Man Theory. Its thesis was that the critical decisions in human development were made by individuals, special people gifted in personality and circumstance. The second we named the Wave Theory. It argued that only the masses could effectively determine the course of history. Those very visible individuals who appeared as leaders of the great movements were, in fact, only those who happened to articulate the direction which had already been chosen. They were as much the victims of the process as any other single individual. Flotsam. Running Dog and I used to be able to debate this issue for hours.

It is true that this particular question has ceased to interest me much. But a correlative question has come to interest me more. I spent most of my fortieth birthday sitting by myself, listening to Pachelbel's *Canon*, over and over, and I'm asking myself: Are some people special? Are some people more special than others? *Have I spent my whole life backing the wrong horse?*

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I mean, it was my birthday and not one damn person called.

Finally, about four o'clock in the afternoon, I gave up and I called him. "Eh, Poncho," I say. "What's happening?"

"Eh, Cisco," he answers. "Happy birthday."

"Thanks," I tell him. I can't decide whether I am more pissed to know he remembered but didn't call than I was when I thought he forgot.

"The big four-o," he says. "Wait a second, buddy. Let me go turn the music down." He's got the *William Tell Overture* blasting on the stereo. He's always got the *William Tell Overture* blasting on the stereo. I'm not saying the man has a problem, but the last time we were in Safeway together he claimed to see a woman being kidnapped by a silver baron over in frozen foods. He pulled the flip top off a Tab and lobbed the can into the ice cream. "Cover me," he shouts, and runs an end pattern with the cart through the soups. I had to tell everyone he was having a Vietnam flashback.

And the mask. There are times and seasons when a mask is useful; I'm the first to admit that. It's Thanksgiving, say, and you're an Indian so it's never been one of your favorite holidays, and you've got no family because you spent your youth playing the supporting role to some macho creep who couldn't commit, so here you are, *standing in line*, to see "Rocky IV" and someone you know walks by. I mean, I've been there. But for everyday, for your ordinary life, a mask is only going to make you *more* obvious. There's an element of exhibitionism in it. A large element. If you ask me.

So now he's back on the phone. He sighs. "God," he says. "I miss those thrilling days of yesteryear."

See? We haven't talked twenty seconds and already the subject is *his* problems. *His* ennui. *His* angst. "I'm having an affair," I tell him. Two years ago I wouldn't have said it. Two years ago he'd just completed his EST training and he would have told me to take responsibility for it. Now he's into biofeedback and astrology. Now we're not responsible for anything.

"Yeah?" he says. He thinks for a minute. "You're not married," he points out.

I can't see that this is relevant. "She is," I tell him.

"Yeah?" he says again, only this "yeah" has a nasty quality to it; this "yeah" tells me someone is hoping for sensationalistic details. This is not the "yeah" of a concerned friend. Still, I can't help playing to it. For years I've been holding this man's horse while he leaps onto its back from the roof. For years I've been providing cover from behind a rock while he breaks for the back door. I'm forty now. It's time to get something back from him. So I hint at the use of controlled substances. We're talking peyote *and* cocaine. I mention pornography. Illegally imported. From

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Denmark. Of course, it's not really *my* affair. Can you picture me? My affair is quiet and ardent. I borrowed this affair from another friend. It shows you the lengths I have to go to before anyone will listen to me.

I may finally have gone too far. He's really at a loss now. "Women," he says finally. "You can't live with them and you can't live without them." Which is a joke, coming from him. He had that single-man-raising-his-orphaned-nephew-all-alone schtick working so smoothly the women were passing each other on the way in and out the door. Or maybe it was the mask and the leather. What do women want? Who has a clue?

"Is that it?" I ask him. "The sum total of your advice? She won't leave her husband. Man, my *heart* is broken."

"Oh," he says. There's a long pause. "Don't let it show," he suggests. Then he sighs. Again. "I miss that old white horse," he tells me. And you know what I do? I hang up on him. And you know what he *doesn't* do? He doesn't call me back.

It really hurts me.

So his second reaction, now that I don't want to listen to him explaining his new theories to me, is to say that I seem to be sulking about something, he can't imagine what. And this is harder to deny.

The day after my birthday I went for a drive in my car, a little white Saab with personalized license plates. KEMO, they say. Maybe the phone is ringing, maybe it's not. I feel better when I don't know. So, he misses his horse. Hey, *I've* never been the same since that little pinto of mine joined the Big Round-up, but I try not to burden my friends with this. I try not to burden my friends with *anything*. I just nurse them back to health when the Cavendish gang leaves them for dead. I just come in the middle of the night with the medicine man when little Britt has a fever and it's not responding to Tylenol. I just organize the surprise party when a friend turns forty.

You want to bet even *Attila the Hun* had a party on his fortieth? You want to bet he was one hard man to surprise? And who blew up the balloons and had everyone hiding under the rugs and in with the goats? This name is lost forever.

I drove out into the country, where every cactus holds its memory for me, where every outcropping of rock once hid an outlaw. Ten years ago the terrain was still so rough I would have had to take the International Scout. Now it's a paved highway straight to the hanging tree. I pulled over to the shoulder of the road, turned off the motor, and I just sat there. I was remembering the time Ms. Emily Cooper stumbled into the Wilcox bank robbery looking for her little girl who'd gone with friends to the swimming hole and hadn't bothered to tell her mama. We were on our way to see Colonel Davis at Fort Comanche about some cattle rustling.

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We hadn't heard about the bank robbery. Which is why we were taken completely by surprise.

My pony and I were eating the masked man's dust, as usual, when something hit me from behind. Arnold Wilcox, a heavy-set man who sported a five o'clock shadow by eight in the morning, jumped me from the big rock overlooking the Butterfield trail and I went down like a sack of potatoes. I heard horses converging on us from the left and the right and that hypertrophic white stallion of his took off like a big bird. I laid one on Arnold's stubbly jaw, but he cold-cocked me with the butt of his pistol and I couldn't tell you what happened next.

I don't come to until it's after dark and I'm trussed up like a turkey. Ms. Cooper is next to me and her hands are tied behind her back with a red bandanna and there's a rope around her feet. She looks disheveled, but pretty; her eyes are wide and I can tell she's not too pleased to be lying here next to an Indian. Her dress is buttoned up to the chin so I'm thinking at least, thank God, they've respected her. It's cold, even as close together as we are. The Wilcoxes are all huddled around the fire, counting money, and the smoke is a straight white line in the sky you could see for miles. So this is more good news, and I'm thinking the Wilcoxes were always a bunch of dumb-ass honkies when it came to your basic woodlore. I'm wondering how they got it together to pull off a bank job, when I hear horse's hooves and my question is answered. Pierre Cardeaux, Canadian French, hops off the horse's back and goes straight to the fire and stamps it out.

"Imbeciles!" he tells them, only he's got this heavy accent so it comes out "Eembeeceeles."

Which insults the Wilcoxes a little. "Hold on there, hombre," Andrew Wilcox says. "Jess because we followed your plan into the bank and your trail for the getaway doesn't make you the boss here," and Pierre pays him about as much notice as you do an ant your horse is about to step on. He comes over to us and puts his hand under Ms. Cooper's chin, sort of thoughtfully. She spits at him and he laughs.

"Spunk," he says. "I like that." I mean, I suppose that's what he says, because that's what they always say, but the truth is, with his accent, I don't understand a word.

Andrew Wilcox isn't finished yet. He's got this big chicken leg which he's eating and it's dribbling onto his chin, so he wipes his arm over his face. Which just spreads the grease around more, really, and anyway, he's got this hunk of chicken stuck between his front teeth, so Pierre can hardly keep a straight face when he talks to him. "I understand why we're keeping the woman," Andrew says. "Cause she has—uses. But the Injun there. He's just going to be baggage. I want to waste him."

"*Mon ami*," says Pierre. "Even *pour vous*, thees stupiditee lives me

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spitchless." He's kissing his fingers to illustrate the point as if he were really French and not just Canadian French and has probably never drunk really good wine in his life. I'm lying in the dust and whatever they've bound my wrists with is cutting off the circulation so my hands feel like someone is jabbing them with porcupine needles. Even now, I can remember smelling the smoke which wasn't there any more and the Wilcoxes who were and the lavender eau de toilette that Ms. Cooper used. And horses and dust and sweat. These were the glory days, but *whose* glory you may well ask, and even if I answered, what difference would it make?

Ms. Cooper gets a good whiff of Andrew Wilcox and it makes her cough.

"He's right, little brother," says Russell Wilcox, the runt of the litter at about three hundred odd pounds and a little quicker on the uptake than the rest of the family. "You ever heared tell of a man who rides a white horse, wears a black mask, and shoots a very pricey kind of bullet? This here Injun is his compadre."

"*Oui, oui, oui, oui,*" says Pierre agreeably. The little piggie. He indicates me and raises his eyebrows one at a time. "*Avec le sauvage* we can, how you say? Meck a deal."

"*Votre mere,*" I tell him. He gives me a good kick in the ribs and he's wearing those pointy-toed kind of cowboy boots, so I feel it all right. Finally I hear the sound I've been waiting for, a hoot-owl over in the trees behind Ms. Cooper, and then *he* rides up. He hasn't even gotten his gun out yet. "Don't move," he tells Pierre. "Or I'll be forced to draw," but he hasn't finished the sentence when Russell Wilcox has his arm around my neck and the point of his knife jabbing into my back.

"We give you the Injun," he says. "Or we give you the girl. You ain't taking both. You comprendez, pardner?"

Now, if he'd *asked* me, I'd have said, hey, don't worry about *me*, rescue the woman. And if he'd hesitated, I would have insisted. But he didn't ask and he didn't hesitate. He just hoisted Ms. Cooper up onto the saddle in front of him and pulled the bottom of her skirt down so her legs didn't show. "There's a little girl in Springfield who's going to be mighty happy to see you, Ms. Cooper," I hear him saying, and I've got a suspicion from the look on her face that they're not going straight to Springfield anyway. And that's it. Not one word for me.

Of course, he comes back, but by this time the Wilcoxes and Pierre have fallen asleep around the cold campfire and I've had to inch my way through the dust on my side like a snake over to Russell Wilcox's knife, which fell out of his hand when he nodded off, whittling. I've had to cut my own bonds, and my hands are behind me so I carve up my thumb a little, too. The whole time I'm right there beneath Russell and he's snorting and snuffling and shifting around like he's waking up so my heart

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nearly stops. It's a wonder my hands don't have to be amputated, they've been without blood for so long. And then there's a big shoot-out and I provide a lot of cover. A couple of days pass before I feel like talking to him about it.

"You rescued Ms. Cooper first," I remind him. "And that was the right thing to do; I'm not saying it wasn't; don't misunderstand me. But it seemed to me that you made up your mind kind of quickly. It didn't seem like a hard decision."

He reaches across the saddle and puts a hand on my hand. Behind the black mask, the blue eyes are sensitive and caring. "Of course I wanted to rescue you, old friend," he says. "If I'd made the decision based solely on my own desires, that's what I would have done. But it seemed to me I had a higher responsibility to the more innocent party. It was a hard choice. It may have felt quick to you, but, believe me, I struggled with it." He withdraws his hand and kicks his horse a little ahead of us because the trail is narrowing. I duck under the branch of a Prairie Spruce. "Besides," he says, back over his shoulder. "I couldn't leave a woman with a bunch of animals like Pierre Cardeaux and the Wilcoxes. A pretty woman like that. Alone. Defenseless."

I start to tell him what a bunch of racists like Pierre Cardeaux and the Wilcoxes might do to a lonely and defenseless Indian. Arnold Wilcox wanted my scalp. "*I* remember the Alamo," he kept saying and maybe he meant Little Big Horn; I didn't feel like exploring this. Pierre kept assuring him there would be plenty of time for "trophies" later. And Andrew trotted out that old chestnut about the only good Indian being a dead Indian. None of which was pleasant to lie there listening to. But I never said it. Because by then the gap between us was so great I would have had to shout, and anyway the ethnic issue has always made us both a little touchy. I wish I had a nickel for every time I've heard him say that some of his best friends are Indians. And I know that there are bad Indians; I don't deny it and I don't mind fighting them. I just always thought I should get to decide which ones were the bad ones.

I sat in that car until sunset.

But the next day he calls. "Have you ever noticed how close the holy word 'om' is to our Western word 'home'?" he asks. That's his opening. No hi, how are you? He never asks how I am. If he did, I'd tell him I was fine, just the way you're supposed to. I wouldn't burden him with my problems. I'd just like to be asked, you know?

But he's got a point to make and it has something to do with Dorothy in the *Wizard of Oz*. How she clicks her heels together and says, over and over like a mantra, "There's no place like home, there's no place like home," and she's actually able to travel through space. "Not in the book," I tell him.

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"I *know*," he says. "In the movie."

"I thought it was the shoes," I say.

And his voice lowers; he's that excited. "What if it was the *words*?" he asks. "I've got a mantra."

Of course, I'm aware of this. It always used to bug me that he wouldn't tell me what it was. Your mantra, he says, loses its power if it's spoken aloud. So by now I'm beginning to guess what his mantra might be. "A bunch of people I know," I tell him, "all had the same guru. And one day they decided to share the mantras he'd given them. They each wrote their mantra on a piece of paper and passed it around. And you know what? They all had the *same* mantra. So much for personalization."

"They lacked faith," he points out.

"Rightfully so."

"I gotta go," he tells me. We're reaching the crescendo in the background music and it cuts off with a click. Silence. He doesn't say goodbye. I refuse to call him back..

The truth is, I'm tired of always being there for him.

So I don't hear from him again until this morning when he calls with the great Displacement Theory. By now I've been forty almost ten days, if you believe the birth certificate the reservation drew up; I find a lot of inaccuracies surfaced when they translated moons into months. So that I've never been too sure what my rising sign is. Not that it matters to me, but it's important to him all of a sudden; apparently you can't analyze personality effectively without it. He thinks I'm a Pisces rising; he'd love to be proved right.

"We can go *back*, old buddy," he says. "I've found the way back."

"Why would we want to?" I ask. The sun is shining and it's cold out. I was thinking of going for a run.

Does he hear me? About like always. "I figured it out," he says. "It's a combination of biofeedback *and* the mantra 'home.' I've been working and working on it. I could always leave, you know, that was never the problem, but I could never *arrive*. Something outside me stopped me and forced me back." He pauses here and I think I'm supposed to say something, but I'm too pissed. He goes on. "Am I getting too theoretical for you? Because I'm about to get more so. Try to stay with me. The key word is *displacement*." He says this like he's shivering. "I couldn't get back because there was no room for me there. The only way back is through an exchange. Someone else has to come forward."

He pauses again and this pause goes on and on. Finally I grunt. A redskin sound. Noncommittal.

His voice is severe. "This is too important for you to miss just because you're sulking about god knows what, pilgrim," he says. "This is travel through space *and* time."

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"This is baloney," I tell him. I'm uncharacteristically blunt, blunter than I ever was during the primal-scream-return-to-the-womb period. If nobody's listening, what does it matter?

"Displacement," he repeats and his voice is all still and important. "Ask yourself, buddy, *what happened to the buffalo?*"

I don't believe I've heard him correctly. "Say *what*?"

"Return with me," he says and then he's gone for good and this time he hasn't hung up the phone; this time I can still hear the *William Tell Overture* repeating the hoofbeat part. There's a noise out front so I go to the door, and damned if I don't have a buffalo, shuffling around on my ornamental strawberries, looking surprised. "You call this grass?" it asks me. It looks up and down the street, more and more alarmed. "Where's the plains, man? Where's the railroad?"

So I'm happy for him. Really I am.

But I'm not going with him. Let him roam it alone this time. He'll be fine. Like Rambo.

Only then another buffalo appears. And another. Pretty soon I've got a whole herd of them out front, trying to eat my yard and gagging. And whining. "The water tastes funny. You got any water with locusts in it?" I don't suppose it's an accident that I've got the same number of buffalo here as there are men in the Cavendish gang. Plus one. I keep waiting to see if any more appear; maybe someone else will go back and help him. But they don't. This is it.

You remember the theories of history I told you about. Back in the beginning? Well, maybe somewhere between the great men and the masses, there's a third kind of person. Someone who listens. Someone who tries to *help*. You don't hear about these people much so there probably aren't many of them. Oh, you hear about the failures, all right, the shams: Brutus, John Alden, Rasputin. And maybe you think there aren't any at all, that nobody could love someone else more than he loves himself. Just because *you* can't. Hey, I don't really care what you think. Because I'm here and the heels of my moccasins are clicking together and I couldn't stop them even if I tried. And it's okay. Really. It's who I am. It's what I do.

I'm going to leave you with a bit of theory to think about. It's a sort of riddle. There are good Indians, there are bad Indians and there are dead Indians. Which am I?

There can be more than one right answer. ●

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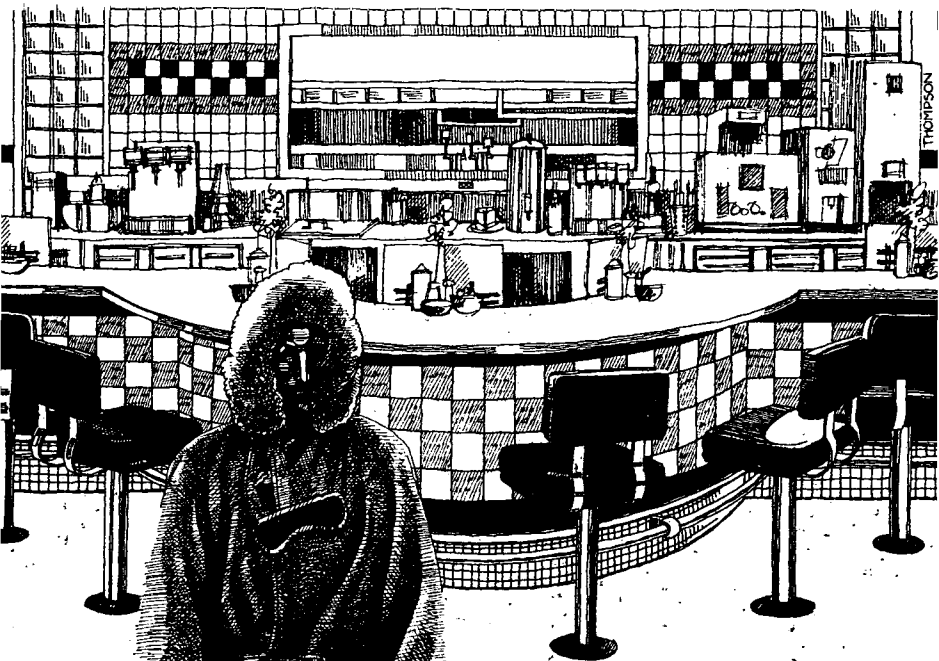

WHY I LEFT HARRY'S ALL-NIGHT HAMBURGERS

by Lawrence Watt-Evans

The author has recently relocated, with his wife and two children, from rural Kentucky to the Maryland suburbs of Washington. The following tale is his first to be published in *IAsfm*, but his most recent novels include: *Shining Steel* (Avon, June 1986) and *With A Single Spell* (Del Rey, March 1987). Del Rey will also publish *The Wizard and the War Machine* (a sequel to Mr. Watt-Evans's earlier book, *The Cyborg and the Sorcerers*) later this year.

art:
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Thompson

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Harry's was a nice place—probably still is. I haven't been back lately. It's a couple of miles off I-79, a few exits north of Charleston, near a place called Sutton. Used to do a pretty fair business until they finished building the Interstate out from Charleston and made it worthwhile for some fast-food joints to move in right next to the cloverleaf; nobody wanted to drive the extra miles to Harry's after that. Folks used to wonder how old Harry stayed in business, as a matter of fact, but he did all right even without the Interstate trade. I found out when I worked there.

Why did I work there, instead of at one of the fast-food joints? Because my folks lived in a little house just around the corner from Harry's, out in the middle of nowhere—not in Sutton itself, just out there on the road. Wasn't anything around except our house and Harry's place. He lived out back of his restaurant. That was about the only thing I could walk to in under an hour, and I didn't have a car.

This was when I was sixteen. I needed a job, because my dad was out of work again and if I was gonna do anything I needed my own money. Mom didn't mind my using her car—so long as it came back with a full tank of gas and I didn't keep it too long. That was the rule. So I needed some work, and Harry's All-Night Hamburgers was the only thing within walking distance. Harry said he had all the help he needed—two cooks and two people working the counter, besides himself. The others worked days, two to a shift, and Harry did the late night stretch all by himself. I hung out there a little, since I didn't have anywhere else, and it looked like pretty easy work—there was hardly any business, and those guys mostly sat around telling dirty jokes. So I figured it was perfect.

Harry, though, said that he didn't need any help.

I figured that was probably true, but I wasn't going to let logic keep me out of driving my mother's car. I did some serious begging, and after I'd made his life miserable for a week or two, Harry said he'd take a chance and give me a shot, working the graveyard shift, midnight to eight A.M., as his counterman, busboy, and janitor all in one.

I talked him down to 7:30, so I could still get to school, and we had us a deal. I didn't care about school so much myself, but my parents wanted me to go, and it was a good place to see my friends, y'know? Meet girls and so on.

So I started working at Harry's nights. I showed up at midnight the first night, and Harry gave me an apron and a little hat, like something from a diner in an old movie, same as he wore himself. I was supposed to wait tables and clean up, not cook, so I don't know why he wanted me to wear them, but he gave them to me, and I needed the bucks, so I put them on and pretended I didn't notice that the apron was all stiff with grease and smelled like something nasty had died on it a few weeks back. And Harry—he's a funny old guy, always looked fifty-ish, as far back as

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I can remember. Never young, but never getting really old, either, you know? Some people do that, they just seem to go on forever. Anyway, he showed me where everything was in the kitchen and back room, told me to keep busy cleaning up whatever looked like it wanted cleaning, and told me, over and over again, like he was really worried that I was going to cause trouble, "Don't bother the customers. Just take their orders, bring them their food, and don't bother them. You got that?"

"Sure," I said, "I got it."

"Good," he said. "We get some funny guys in here at night, but they're good customers, most of them, so don't you screw up with anyone. One customer complains, one customer stiffs you for the check, and you're out of work, you got that?"

"Sure," I said, though I've gotta admit I was wondering what to do if some cheapskate skipped without paying. I tried to figure how much of a meal would be worth paying for in order to keep the job, but with taxes and all it got too tricky for me to work out, and I decided to wait until the time came, if it ever did.

Then Harry went back in the kitchen, and I got a broom and swept up out front a little until a couple of truckers came in and ordered burgers and coffee.

I was pretty awkward at first, but I got the hang of it after a little bit. Guys would come in, women, too, one or two at a time, and they'd order something, and Harry'd have it ready faster than you can say "cheese," practically, and they'd eat it, and wipe their mouths, and go use the john, and drive off, and none of them said a damn thing to me except their orders, and I didn't say anything back except "Yes, sir," or "Yes, ma'am," or "Thank you, come again." I figured they were all just truckers who didn't like the fast-food places.

That was what it was like at first, anyway, from midnight to about one, one-thirty, but then things would slow down. Even the truckers were off the roads by then, I guess, or they didn't want to get that far off the Interstate, or they'd all had lunch, or something. Anyway, by about two that first night I was thinking it was pretty clear why Harry didn't think he needed help on this shift, when the door opened and the little bell rang.

I jumped a bit; that bell startled me, and I turned around, but then I turned back to look at Harry, 'cause I'd seen him out of the corner of my eye, you know, and he'd got this worried look on his face, and *he* was watching *me;* he wasn't looking at the customer at all.

About then I realized that the reason the bell had startled me was that I hadn't heard anyone drive up, and who the hell was going to be out walking to Harry's place at two in the morning in the West Virginia

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mountains? The way Harry was looking at me, I knew this must be one of those special customers he didn't want me to scare away.

So I turned around, and there was this short little guy in a really heavy coat, all zipped up, made of that shiny silver fabric you see race-car drivers wear in the cigarette ads, you know? And he had on padded ski pants of the same stuff, with pockets all over the place, and he was just putting down a hood, and he had on big thick goggles like he'd been out in a blizzard, but it was April and there hadn't been any snow in weeks and it was about fifty, sixty degrees out.

Well, I didn't want to blow it, so I pretended I didn't notice, I just said, "Hello, sir; may I take your order?"

He looked at me funny and said, "I suppose so."

"Would you like to see a menu?" I said, trying to be on my best behavior—hell, I was probably overdoing it; I'd let the truckers find their own menus.

"I suppose so," he said again, and I handed him the menu.

He looked it over, pointed to a picture of a cheeseburger that looked about as much like anything from Harry's grill as Sly Stallone looks like me, and I wrote it down and passed the slip back to Harry, and he hissed at me, "Don't bother the guy!"

I took the hint, and went back to sweeping until the burger was up, and as I was handing the plate to the guy there was a sound out front like a shotgun going off, and this green light flashed in through the window, so I nearly dropped the thing, but I couldn't go look because the customer was digging through his pockets for money, to pay for the burger.

"You can pay after you've eaten, sir," I said.

"I will pay first," he said, real formal. "I may need to depart quickly. My money may not be good here."

The guy hadn't got any accent, but with that about the money I figured he was a foreigner, so I waited, and he hauled out a handful of weird coins, and I told him, "I'll need to check with the manager." He gave me the coins, and while I was taking them back to Harry and trying to see out the window, through the curtain, to see where that green light came from, the door opened and these three women came in, and where the first guy was all wrapped up like an Eskimo, these people weren't wearing anything but jeans. Women, remember, and it was only April.

Hey, I was just sixteen, so I tried real hard not to stare and I went running back to the kitchen and tried to tell Harry what was going on, but the money and the green light and the half-naked women all got tangled up and I didn't make much sense.

"I *told* you I get some strange customers, kid," he said. "Let's see the money." So I gave him the coins, and he said, "Yeah, we'll take these,"

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and made change—I don't know how, because the writing on the coins looked like Russian to me, and I couldn't figure out what any of them were. He gave me the change, and then looked me in the eye and said, "Can you handle those women, boy? It's part of the job; I wasn't expecting them tonight, but we get strange people in here, I told you that. You think you can handle it without losing me any customers, or do you want to call it a night and find another job?"

I really wanted that paycheck; I gritted my teeth and said, "No problem!"

When you were sixteen, did you ever try to wait tables with six bare boobs right there in front of you? Those three were laughing and joking in some foreign language I'd never heard before, and I think only one of them spoke English, because she did all the ordering. I managed somehow, and by the time they left Harry was almost smiling at me.

Around four things slowed down again, and around four-thirty or five the breakfast crowd began to trickle in, but between two and four there were about half a dozen customers, I guess; I don't remember who they all were any more, most of them weren't that strange, but that first little guy and the three women, them I remember. Maybe some of the others were pretty strange, too, maybe stranger than the first guy, but he was the *first,* which makes a difference, and then those women—well, that's gonna really make an impression on a sixteen-year-old, y'know? It's not that they were particularly beautiful or anything, because they weren't, they were just women, and I wasn't used to seeing women with no shirts.

When I got off at seven-thirty, I was all mixed up; I didn't know what the hell was going on. I was beginning to think maybe I imagined it all.

I went home and changed clothes and caught the bus to school, and what with not really having adjusted to working nights, and being tired, and having to think about schoolwork, I was pretty much convinced that the whole thing had been some weird dream. So I came home, slept through until about eleven, then got up and went to work again.

And damn, it was almost the same, except that there weren't any half-naked women this time. The normal truckers and the rest came in first, then they faded out, and the weirdos starting turning up.

At sixteen, you know, you think you can cope with anything. At least, I did. So I didn't let the customers bother me, not even the ones who didn't look like they were exactly human beings to begin with. Harry got used to me being there, and I did make it a lot easier on him, so after the first couple of weeks it was pretty much settled that I could stay on for as long as I liked.

And I liked it fine, really, once I got used to the weird hours. I didn't have much of a social life during the week, but I never had, living where I did, and I could afford to do the weekends up in style with what Harry

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paid me and the tips I got. Some of those tips I had to take to the jewelers in Charleston, different ones so nobody would notice that one guy was bringing in all these weird coins and trinkets, but Harry gave me some pointers—he'd been doing the same thing for years, except that he'd gone through every jeweler in Charleston and Huntington and Wheeling and Washington, PA., and was halfway through Pittsburgh.

It was fun, really, seeing just what would turn up there and order a burger. I think my favorite was the guy who walked in, no car, no lights, no nothing, wearing this electric blue hunter's vest with wires all over it, and these medieval tights with what Harry called a codpiece, with snow and some kind of sticky goop all over his vest and in his hair, shivering like it was the Arctic out there, when it was the middle of July. He had some kind of little animal crawling around under that vest, but he wouldn't let me get a look at it; from the shape of the bulge it made it might have been a weasel or something. He had the strangest damn accent you ever heard, but he acted right at home and ordered without looking at the menu.

Harry admitted, when I'd been there awhile, that he figured anyone else would mess things up for him somehow. I might have thought I was going nuts, or I might have called the cops, or I might have spread a lot of strange stories around, but I didn't, and Harry appreciated that.

Hey, that was easy. If these people didn't bother Harry, I figured, why should they bother me? And it wasn't anybody else's business, either. When people asked, I used to tell them that sure, we got weirdos in the place late at night—but I never said just how weird.

And I never got as cool about it as Harry was; I mean, a flying saucer in the parking lot wouldn't make Harry blink. *I* blinked, when we got 'em—we did, but not very often, and I had to really work not to stare at them. Most of the customers had more sense; if they came in something strange they hid it in the woods or something. But there were always a few who couldn't be bothered. If any state cops ever cruised past there and saw those things, I guess they didn't dare report them. No one would've believed them anyway.

I asked Harry once if all these guys came from the same place.

"Damned if I know," he said. He'd never asked, and he didn't want me to, either.

Except he was wrong about thinking that would scare them away. Sometimes you can tell when someone wants to talk, and some of these people did. So I talked to them.

I think I was seventeen by the time someone told me what was really going on, though.

Before you ask any stupid questions, no, they weren't any of them Martians or monsters from outer space or anything like that. Some of

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them were from West Virginia, in fact. Just not *our* West Virginia. Lots of different West Virginias, instead. What the science fiction writers called "parallel worlds." That's one name, anyway. Other dimensions, alternate realities, they had lots of different names for it.

It all makes sense, really. A couple of them explained it to me. See, everything that ever could possibly have happened, in the entire history of the universe right from the Big Bang up until now, *did* happen—somewhere. And *every* possible difference means a different universe. Not just if Napoleon lost at Waterloo, or won, or whatever he didn't do here; what does Napoleon matter to the *universe,* anyway? Betelgeuse doesn't give a flying damn for all of Europe, past, present, or future. But every single atom or particle or whatever, whenever it had a chance to do something—break up or stay together, or move one direction instead of another, whatever—it did *all* of them, but all in different universes. They didn't branch off, either—all the universes were always there, there just wasn't any difference between them until this particular event came along. And that means that there are millions and millions of identical universes, too, where the differences haven't happened yet. There's an infinite number of universes—more than that, an infinity of infinities. I mean, you can't really comprehend it; if you think you're close, then multiply that a few zillion times. *Everything* is out there.

And that means that in a lot of those universes, people figured out how to travel from one to another. Apparently it's not that hard; there are lots of different ways to do it, too, which is why we got everything from guys in street clothes to people in spacesuits and flying saucers.

But there's one thing about it—with an infinite number of universes, I mean really infinite, how can you find just one? Particularly the first time out? Fact is, you can't. It's just not possible. So the explorers go out, but they don't come back. Maybe if some *did* come back, they could look at what they did and where it took them and figure out how to measure and aim and all that, but so far as any of the ones I've talked to know, nobody has ever done it. When you go out, that's it, you're out there. You can go on hopping from one world to the next, or you can settle down in one forever, but like the books say, you *really* can't go home again. You can get close, maybe—one way I found out a lot of this was in exchange for telling this poor old geezer a lot about the world outside Harry's. He was pretty happy about it when I was talking about what I'd seen on TV, and naming all the presidents I could think of, but then he asked me something about some religion I'd never heard of that he said he belonged to, and when I said I'd never heard of it he almost broke down. I guess he was looking for a world like his own, and ours was, you know, close, but not close enough. He said something about what he called a

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"random walk principle"—if you go wandering around at random you keep coming back close to where you started, but you'll never have your feet in *exactly* the original place, they'll always be a little bit off to one side or the other.

So there are millions of these people out there drifting from world to world, looking for whatever they're looking for, sometimes millions of them identical to each other, too, and they run into each other. They know what to look for, see. So they trade information, and some of them tell me they're working on figuring out how to *really* navigate whatever it is they do, and they've figured out some of it already, so they can steer a little.

I wondered out loud why so many of them turn up at Harry's, and this woman with blue-grey skin—from some kind of medication, she told me—tried to explain it. West Virginia is one of the best places to travel between worlds, particularly up in the mountains around Sutton, because it's a pretty central location for eastern North America, but there isn't anything there. I mean, there aren't any big cities, or big military bases, or anything, so that if there's an atomic war or something—and apparently there have been a *lot* of atomic wars, or wars with even worse weapons, in different worlds—nobody's very likely to heave any missiles at Sutton, West Virginia. Even in the realities where the Europeans never found America and it's the Chinese or somebody building the cities, there just isn't any reason to build anything near Sutton. And there's something in particular that makes it an easy place to travel between worlds, too; I didn't follow the explanation. She said something about the Earth's magnetic field, but I didn't catch whether that was part of the explanation or just a comparison of some kind.

The mountains and forests make it easy to hide, too, which is why our area is better than out in the desert someplace.

Anyway, right around Sutton it's pretty safe and easy to travel between worlds, so lots of people do.

The strange thing, though, is that for some reason that nobody really seemed very clear on, Harry's, or something like it, is in just about the same place in millions of different realities. More than millions; infinities, really. It's not always exactly Harry's All-Night Hamburgers; one customer kept calling Harry Sal, for instance. It's *there,* though, or something like it, and one thing that doesn't seem to change much is that travelers can eat there without causing trouble. Word gets around that Harry's is a nice, quiet place, with decent burgers, where nobody's going to hassle them about anything, and they can pay in gold or silver if they haven't got the local money, or in trade goods or whatever they've got that Harry can use. It's easy to find, because it's in a lot of universes, relatively—as I said, this little area isn't one that varies a whole lot from

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universe to universe, unless you start moving long distances. Or maybe not *easy* to find, but it can be found. One guy told me that Harry's seems to be in more universes than Washington, D.C. He'd even seen one of my doubles before, last time he stopped in, and he thought he might have actually gotten back to the same place until I swore I'd never seen him before. He had these really funny eyes, so I was sure I'd have remembered him.

We never actually got repeat business from other worlds, y'know, not once, not ever; nobody could ever find the way back to exactly our world. What we got were people who had heard about Harry's from other people, in some other reality. Oh, maybe it wasn't exactly the same Harry's they'd heard about, but they'd heard that there was usually a good place to eat and swap stories in about that spot.

That's a weird thought, you know, that every time I served someone a burger a zillion of me were serving burgers to a zillion others—not all of them the same, either.

So they come to Harry's to eat, and they trade information with each other there, or in the parking lot, and they take a break from whatever they're doing.

They came there, and they talked to me about all those other universes, and I was seventeen years old, man. It was like those Navy recruiting ads on TV, see the world—except it was see the *worlds,* all of them, not just one. I listened to everything those guys said. I heard them talk about the worlds where zeppelins strafed Cincinnati in a Third World War, about places the dinosaurs never died out and mammals never evolved any higher than rats, about cities built of colored glass or dug miles underground, about worlds where all the men were dead, or all the women, or both, from biological warfare. Any story you ever heard, anything you ever read, those guys could top it. Worlds where speaking aloud could get you the death penalty—not what you said, just saying *anything* out loud. Worlds with spaceships fighting a war against Arcturus. Beautiful women, strange places, everything you could ever want, out there *somewhere,* but it might take forever to find it.

I listened to those stories for months. I graduated from high school, but there wasn't anyway I could go to college, so I just stayed on with Harry—it paid enough to live on, anyway. I talked to those people from other worlds, even got inside some of their ships, or time machines, or whatever you want to call them, and I thought about how great it would be to just go roaming from world to world. Any time you don't like the way things are going, just pop! And the whole world is different! I could be a white god to the Indians in a world where the Europeans and Asians never reached America, I figured, or find a world where machines do all the work and people just relax and party.

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When my eighteenth birthday came and went without any sign I'd ever get out of West Virginia, I began to really think about it, you know? I started asking customers about it. A lot of them told me not to be stupid; a lot just wouldn't talk about it. Some, though, some of them thought it was a great idea.

There was one guy, this one night—well, first, it was September, but it was still hot as the middle of summer, even in the middle of the night. Most of my friends were gone—they'd gone off to college, or gotten jobs somewhere, or gotten married, or maybe two out of the three. My dad was drinking a lot. The other kids were back in school. I'd started sleeping days, from eight in the morning until about four P.M., instead of evenings. Harry's air conditioner was busted, and I really wanted to just leave it all behind and go find myself a better world. So when I heard these two guys talking at one table about whether one of them had extra room in his machine, I sort of listened, when I could, when I wasn't fetching burgers and Cokes.

Now, one of these two I'd seen before—he'd been coming in every so often ever since I started working at Harry's. He looked like an ordinary guy, but he came in about three in the morning and talked to the weirdos like they were all old buddies, so I figured he had to be from some other world originally himself, even if he stayed put in ours now. He'd come in about every night for a week or two, then disappear for months, then start turning up again, and I had sort of wondered whether he might have licked the navigation problem all those other people had talked about. But then I figured, probably not, either he'd stopped jumping from one world to the next, or else it was just a bunch of parallel people coming in, and it probably wasn't ever the same guy at all, really. Usually, when that happened, we'd get two or three at a time, looking like identical twins or something, but there was only just one of this guy, every time, so I figured, like I said, either he hadn't been changing worlds at all, or he'd figured out how to navigate better than anyone else, or something.

The guy he was talking to was new; I'd never seen him before. He was big, maybe six-four and heavy. He'd come in shaking snow and soot off a plastic coverall of some kind, given me a big grin, and ordered two of Harry's biggest burgers, with everything. Five minutes later the regular customer sat down across the table from him, and now he was telling the regular that he had plenty of room in his ship for anything anyone might want him to haul cross-time.

I figured this was my chance, so when I brought the burgers I said something real polite, like, "Excuse me, sir, but I couldn't help overhearing; d'you think you'd have room for a passenger?"

The big guy laughed and said, "Sure, kid! I was just telling Joe here

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that I could haul him and all his freight, and there'd be room for you, too, if you make it worth my trouble!"

I said, "I've got money; I've been saving up. What'll it take?"

The big guy gave me a big grin again, but before he could say anything Joe interrupted.

"Sid," he said, "could you excuse me for a minute? I want to talk to this young fellow for a minute, before he makes a big mistake."

The big guy, Sid, said, "Sure, sure, I don't mind." So Joe got up, and he yelled to Harry, "Okay if I borrow your counterman for a few minutes?"

Harry yelled back that it was okay. I didn't know what the hell was going on, but I went along, and the two of us went out to this guy's car to talk.

And it really was a car, too—an old Ford van. It was customized, with velvet and bubble windows and stuff, and there was a lot of stuff piled in the back, camping gear and clothes and things, but no sign of machinery or anything. I still wasn't sure, you know, because some of these guys did a really good job of disguising their ships, or time machines, or whatever, but it sure *looked* like an ordinary van, and that's what Joe said it was. He got into the driver's seat, and I got into the passenger seat, and we swiveled around to face each other.

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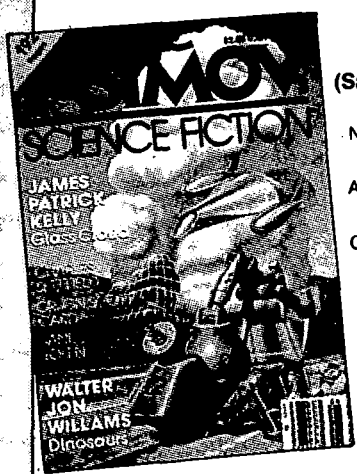

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"So," he said. "Do you know who all these people are? I mean people like Sid?"

"Sure," I said. "They're from other dimensions, parallel worlds and like that."

He leaned back and looked at me hard, and said, "You know that, huh? Did you know that none of them can ever get home?"

"Yes, I knew that," I told him, acting pretty cocky.

"And you still want to go with Sid to other universes? Even when you know you'll never come home to this universe again?"

"That's right, Mister," I told him. "I'm sick of this one. I don't have anything here but a nothing job in a diner; I want to *see* some of the stuff these people talk about, instead of just hearing about it."

"You want to see wonders and marvels, huh?"

"Yes!"

"You want to see buildings a hundred stories high? Cities of strange temples? Oceans thousands of miles wide? Mountains miles high? Prairies, and cities, and strange animals and stranger people?"

Well, that was just exactly what I wanted, better than I could have said it myself. "Yes," I said. "You got it, Mister."

"You lived here all your life?"

"You mean this world? Of course I have."

"No, I meant here in Sutton. You lived here all your life?"

"Well, yeah," I admitted. "Just about."

He sat forward and put his hands together, and his voice got intense, like he wanted to impress me with how serious he was. "Kid," he said, "I don't blame you a bit for wanting something different; I sure as hell wouldn't want to spend my entire life in these hills. But you're going about it the wrong way. You don't want to hitch with Sid."

"Oh, yeah?" I said. "Why not? Am I supposed to build my own machine? Hell, I can't even fix my mother's carburetor."

"No, that's not what I meant. But kid, you can see those buildings a thousand feet high in New York, or in Chicago. You've got oceans here in your own world as good as anything you'll find anywhere. You've got the mountains, and the seas, and the prairies, and all the rest of it. I've been in your world for eight years now, checking back here at Harry's every so often to see if anyone's figured out how to steer in no-space and get me home, and it's one hell of a big, interesting place."

"But," I said, "what about the spaceships, and . . ."

He interrupted me, and said, "You want to see spaceships? You go to Florida and watch a shuttle launch. Man, that's a spaceship. It may not go to other worlds, but that *is* a spaceship. You want strange animals? You go to Australia or Brazil. You want strange people? Go to New York or Los Angeles, or almost anywhere. You want a city carved out of a

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mountain top? It's called Machu Picchu, in Peru, I think. You want ancient, mysterious ruins? They're all over Greece and Italy and North Africa. Strange temples? Visit India; there are supposed to be over a thousand temples in Benares alone. See Angkor Wat, or the pyramids—not just the Egyptian ones, but the Mayan ones, too. And the great thing about all of these places, kid, is that afterwards, if you want to, you can come home. You don't *have* to, but you *can*. Who knows? You might get homesick some day. Most people do. *I* did. I wish to hell I'd seen more of my own world before I volunteered to try any others."

I kind of stared at him for a while. "I don't know," I said. I mean, it seemed so easy to just hop in Sid's machine and be gone forever, I thought, but New York was five hundred miles away—and then I realized how stupid that was.

"Hey," he said, "don't forget, if you decide I was wrong, you can always come back to Harry's and bum a ride with someone. It won't be Sid, he'll be gone forever, but you'll find someone. Most world-hoppers are lonely, kid; they've left behind everyone they ever knew. You won't have any trouble getting a lift."

Well, that decided it, because, you know, he was obviously right about that, as soon as I thought about it. I told him so.

"Well, good!" he said. "Now, you go pack your stuff and apologize to Harry and all that, and I'll give you a lift to Pittsburgh. You've got money to travel with from there, right? These idiots still haven't figured out how to steer, so I'm going back home—not my *real* home, but where I live in your world—and I wouldn't mind a passenger." And he smiled at me, and I smiled back, and we had to wait until the bank opened the next morning, but he didn't really mind. All the way to Pittsburgh he was singing these hymns and war-songs from his home world, where there was a second civil war in the nineteen-twenties because of some fundamentalist preacher trying to overthrow the Constitution and set up a church government; he hadn't had anyone he could sing them to in years, he said.

That was six years ago, and I haven't gone back to Harry's since.

So that was what got me started traveling. What brings *you* to Benares? ●

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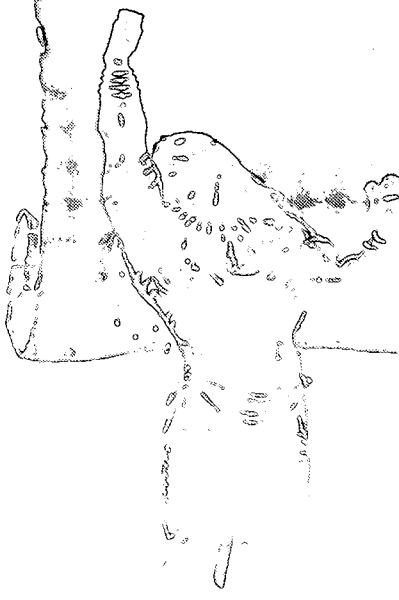
by Robert Silverberg

THE FASCINATION OF THE ABOMINATION

Robert Silverberg's novella, "Sailing to Byzantium" (February 1985), brought him his fifth Nebula, and made him the only writer ever to win five of these prestigious awards. His most recent publication in *IAsfm*, "Gilgamesh in the Outback" (July 1986), may yet bring him his sixth. That story is currently a finalist for the 1986 awards.

art: Gary Freeman



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Or think of a decent young citizen in a toga—perhaps too much dice, you know—coming out here in the train of some prefect, or tax-gatherer, or trader even, to mend his fortunes. Land in a swamp, march through the woods, and in some inland post feel the savagery, the utter savagery, had closed round him—all that mysterious life of the wilderness that stirs in the forest, in the jungles, in the hearts of wild men. There's no initiation either into such mysteries. He has to live in the midst of the incomprehensible, which is also detestable. And it has a fascination, too, that goes to work upon him. The fascination of the abomination—you know, imagine the growing regrets, the longing to escape, the powerless disgust, the surrender, the hate. . . .

—Conrad: *Heart of Darkness*

There was fire everywhere: red fire in the sky, blue fire in the water, green fire dancing along the rim of the shore that receded behind the swiftly moving boat. The air had the stink of sulphur about it, and worse things. The clouds here were thick and heavy, with fat gray bellies that scraped against the nearby mountains. And the mountains themselves were demons in stone: a dozen angry volcanoes that were spewing fumes and flame up and down the coastal plain as far as Gilgamesh could see. Out here on the western edge of Hell, beyond the bleak plains of the Outback, it seemed to the Sumerian that the whole world must be burning, down to its deepest roots.

The dolphin-prowed ship with the scarlet sail plunged on and on through the reef-strewn phosphorescent sea toward the island of Pompeii. The boat was the royal yacht of the dictator Sulla, who was somewhere belowdecks, far gone in wine.

Come with me back to Pompeii, Sulla had said to Gilgamesh. Let us talk of finding the treasures of long-lost Uruk, you and I. Well, why not? Gilgamesh wondered. If it was true that the city of his life had been founded anew in Hell, and these Pompeiians had heard some tale that could help him learn where it might be situated, why not strike a deal with Sulla? What was life, in this interminable life after death, if not one long unending *Why Not?*

The towering dark-haired Sumerian stared toward Pompeii. Off in the distance the magical city glimmered in the half-darkness with a strange light of its own.

"Been here before?" a voice said.

Gilgamesh looked to his left and down, a long way down. "Are you talking to me?"

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"To my shadow," the man standing beside him at the rail said. He was short and sharp-nosed, with thick curly hair and dark greasy skin. "I was trying to make conversation. It's an old shipboard custom. Do you mind?"

Gilgamesh glanced balefully at the little man. There was a soft, sleek, pampered look about him. He dressed well, a Roman-style toga and glossy Italian leather shoes, and some sort of little brocaded skullcap perched jauntily at the back of his head. A shrewd face. Bright beady eyes with undeniable intelligence in them. But something fundamentally unlikable about him. And pushy. Surely he ought to be able to see at a glance that Gilgamesh wasn't the sort who cared to be approached by strangers.

The big brindle dog Ajax, sleeping by Gilgamesh's side, awoke, peered, growled. Ajax didn't much care for the little man either, it would seem.

Gilgamesh scowled. "I don't know you."

"Who knows anybody in this Godforsaken place? My name's Herod. Herod Agrippa, actually. What I asked you was whether you'd been to Pompeii before."

"Probably," said Gilgamesh, shrugging.

"Probably? You aren't sure?"

Gilgamesh considered tossing the tiresome little pest over the side.

"Maybe I have, maybe I haven't. You wander back and forth across the face of Hell long enough and all places begin to look the same to you."

"Not to me," Herod said. "And I've done my share of wandering. More than my share. A regular wandering Jew, that's me. Anyway, Pompeii's different. I know, I know, memory's sometimes a problem here in Hell, but if you'd been to Pompeii before, you'd remember it. It's unforgettable. Trust me."

"A wandering Jew?" said Gilgamesh vaguely. "I've heard that story, I think."

"Who hasn't? But I'm not *the* Wandering Jew, you understand. That's Ahasuerus. He's still cruising around Upside, the way the original curse requires. Roaming Earth until the end of the world comes, which apparently hasn't quite happened yet. I'm simply *a* wandering Jew. A different one. Herod."

"So you told me." Pushy little bastard, yes, Gilgamesh thought. From the pushiness alone, it would seem that the little man was one of the New Dead, that irritating horde of scrambling noisy incomprehensible aggressive folk who had come swarming into Hell in the last few thousand years, pretty well ruining the character of the place. But yet there was some sort of Old Dead emanation about this man, too. A borderline type, maybe. From that period when what the New Dead called B.C. was shading into their A.D. time. Gilgamesh rummaged through his thousands of

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years of memories. "I met a Herod once. Some sort of minor desert prince, he was."

"King of Judaea, in fact."

"If you say so."

"Plump-faced man, bald in back, bloodshot eyes?"

"He might have been. He had a rotten look about him, that much I recall. Like fruit left out in the rain too long."

"Herod the Great, that's who you mean. My grandfather. A very nasty man, that one. A very bad piece of business indeed. Ten wives—that alone should show you how unstable he was. And other character deficiencies. A total paranoid, in fact. Though all that ugly nonsense about Salome and John the Baptist, the seven veils, the silver platter—that wasn't him, you know. That was his son Herod Antipas, just as crazy. And it didn't actually happen anything like that. The silver platter stuff was only a fable, and as for Salome—"

"I don't have any idea what you're talking about."

"On the other hand," Herod went on, as though Gilgamesh had not spoken, "My grandfather *did* order the slaying of the first-born. Including his own. The man was a lunatic. I'm not surprised you didn't care for him. He cut a soft deal for himself with Augustus, though. Augustus was always willing to do business with lunatics if he saw political benefits in it for himself. Which is the only reasonable explanation of how my grandfather managed to hold his throne under the Romans for so long. But I understand Augustus won't have anything to do with him now. That's Kleopatra's doing. Because Kleopatra still hates him—old Herod turned her down when she propositioned him, didn't like the shape of her nose, or something like that, but imagine carrying a silly grudge for God knows how many centuries—"

"You buzz like a wasp," Gilgamesh muttered. "Don't you ever stop talking?"

"I like to talk, yes. You don't, I assume. The strong silent type. A difference of style, nothing to get upset about. Oh, I say, look there—there goes Vesuvius again!"

"Vesuvius?"

Herod gestured toward the island-city. "Our volcano. Smack in the middle of downtown, it is. You ever see anything so gorgeous?"

Gilgamesh looked off across the channel toward distant Pompeii. There was new fire in the sky, a single startling point of brilliant scarlet cutting through the murky smoke-fouled atmosphere like a torch, fifty times as bright as the flames coming from the mainland volcanoes. As though driven by a giant pump the blaze rose higher and higher, climbing toward the roof of the cosmos. Under its blinding glare the towers and battlements of the city took on a dazzling mirror-bright sheen.

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"And the city?" Gilgamesh asked. "Will it be destroyed?"

Herod laughed. "There's an eruption just like this every week. Sometimes more often than that. The Pompeiians wouldn't have it any other way. But it never does any harm. All light and no heat, that's the deal in the contract. And never any particulate matter. After the way they got trashed in 79, it's hardly surprising that they don't want an encore. That's 79 A.D., you know. If you count your years at all. At any rate it was after my time, probably after yours. You talk to someone who was there, he'll tell you that it was a total nightmare, but he'll also say that he can't get to sleep at night if there isn't a decent volcano rumbling away nearby. Amazing the way some people not only adapt to danger but actually come to depend on living in the constant presence of—"

Gilgamesh was barely paying attention. He was staring at the volcano-riven night sky. In that sudden fiery illumination a host of air-borne monsters and demons stood revealed. Things that were all mouth and no body, things that were all wing and no head, things that were mere claws, things that were nothing but giant red-streaked yellow eyes borne up by jets of green gas, all of them whirling and screeching high above the sea. Ajax, barking and snarling, capered up and down the deck, leaping wildly as if to challenge the monstrosities that thronged the sky.

Herod laughed. "Sulla's pets. I told you, once you see Pompeii you never forget it. Demons everywhere you look. And wizards. Sorcerers, mages, thaumaturges. Sulla collects them, you know. You can't walk nine paces without someone trying to turn you inside out with one of his tricks."

"Let them try," Gilgamesh said.

He drew an imaginary bow and sent an imaginary shaft soaring through the gullet of one of the foulest of the monsters overhead.

"Oh, they'd leave *you* alone, I think. Man your size, who'd fool around with you? And you look like you might have a little magic yourself. Sulla hire you for his bodyguard, did he?"

"I am not a mercenary," said Gilgamesh stiffly.

"You look like you were a fighting man."

"A warrior, yes. But never for hire, except once, when I was a boy in exile. I was a king."

"Ah. A king! We have something in common, then. I was a king, too, you know."

"Were you?" said Gilgamesh without interest.

"For four or five years, anyway, after Caligula finally banished my miserable uncle Antipas from Judaea and gave the place to me. Very popular with my subjects, I was, if you don't mind my saying it. I think I did quite a decent job, and if I had lived a little longer I might actually have been able to wipe out Christianity before it really got started,

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thereby saving the whole world six bushels of trouble, but—" Herod paused. "You aren't a Christian by any chance, are you? No, no, you don't look the type. But you say you were a king. Where was that, may I ask? Somewhere out toward Armenia, maybe? Cilicia?"

This was becoming infuriating.

Gilgamesh drew himself up to his full looming height and intoned, "Be it known to you that I am Gilgamesh of Uruk, great king, king of Uruk, king of kings, lord of the Land of the Two Rivers."

"King of kings?" Herod repeated. "Lord of the Land of the Two Rivers?" He nodded as though mightily impressed. "Ah. Indeed. And what rivers would those be?"

"You don't know?"

"You must forgive me, my friend. I am a mere provincial, a Judaean, even though it was my good fortune to be educated at the court in Rome. Although I was probably taught something about those Two Rivers of yours they seem to have slipped through one of the many damnable holes in my memory, and therefore—"

Gilgamesh had heard such speeches many times before. Hell was full of Johnny-come-latelies.

Coolly he said, "You Romans knew my country by the name of Mesopotamia."

"Oh, *those* rivers!" Herod cried. "Why didn't you say so? King of Mesopotamia! A Parthian, then, is that what you are? Some relative of Mithridates?"

I *will* throw him overboard, Gilgamesh thought in fury.

With great control he said, "Not a Parthian, no. A Sumerian. We are before the Parthians. Before the Babylonians and Akkadians. Before the Romans as well. *Long* before the Romans."

"A thousand pardons," Herod said.

Gilgamesh glowered and turned away. He peered bleakly into the fire-riven night. The eruption over Pompeii was dying down, now. He wondered how much longer it would be before they reached the island. None too soon, if he had to listen to this Herod's maddening jabber all the way across from the mainland.

After a while Herod said, "Do you intend to be king again?"

"What? Why should I?"

"Most kings who come here do."

"Are *you* a king again?" Gilgamesh asked, without turning.

"I prefer not to be. I never found being a king all that fascinating, to tell you the truth. And I like living in Pompeii too much. It's the first place that's felt like home to me since I died. But Pompeii is Sulla's town, and I don't have the urge to try to take it away from him, not that I'd be able to. If he enjoys being boss here, let him do it, is what I say."

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"I understand," said Gilgamesh. "You are beyond these ambitions."

"Well, you know the old line about how it's better to reign in Hell than to serve in Heaven. That might be true, though I don't really know much about Heaven. Assuming there is any such place. But so far as I'm concerned it feels better to let someone else reign in Hell. My notion is neither to reign nor serve, but just to do my own thing. I suppose that doesn't make much sense to you, does it. If you're like all the rest of the big *goyishe* sword-swingers I've known here, you're itching to get yourself up on a throne again, some throne, any throne—"

"No," Gilgamesh said.

"No?"

"What was that line you used? 'Just to do my own thing'? I like that. *My own thing*. Which was for me, as for you, to be a king; but that was a long time ago, in another life. Here I have no interest in it. What is there to rule, here? This land of trickery and sorcery, where places come and go as though in dreams, and time itself flows fast or slow according to some demon's whim?" Gilgamesh spat. "No, Herod, you mistake me if you think I would be king again! Let me rove freely, let me hunt where I will. And let me find again my one beloved companion, whom I have lost in this land of Hell as I lost him once in the land of the living. Let me be reunited with Enkidu my true brother, the friend of my heart, who is the only one I have ever loved, and that is all I require. Let others be the kings here. While the likes of you and me do our own thing." Gilgamesh grinned and slapped Herod broadly on the back, knocking the little man up hard against the rail. "Eh, Herod? I think we have more in common, you and I, than it seemed at first. Is that not so, King Herod? Is that not so?"

2.

The mainland and the louring fury of all its roaring, sputtering volcanoes dropped away aft and the royal yacht slipped gracefully through the gleaming water toward Pompeii. The city stood large before them now. Green ghost-fires danced on its many-towered walls.

Here on the verge of arriving at a place unknown to him, Gilgamesh felt a faint flicker of excitement. It was the merest shadow of his ancient curiosity, that world-devouring hunger for knowledge and adventure that had sent him roving everywhere within the confines of the Land and far beyond it. Once the bards of Sumer and Akkad had sung of him as the man to whom all things had been made known, the secret things, the truths of life and death. They hadn't been so far from wrong, those

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long-ago singers. He had wanted to know everything, to see everything, to taste everything, to do everything.

Most of that was gone from him now, burned out of his soul in the thousands of years he had spent roving this immense and incomprehensible place after death that was known as Hell. He lived quietly now, seeking little, asking scarcely anything for himself. But some fragment of the old vanished Gilgamesh must yet remain alive within him; or else why did he stare so intently at the bizarre island-city that rose glittering before him out of the phosphorescent sea?

"Make ready for landing!" someone shouted. "All hands make ready!"

Herod disappeared belowdecks. Crewmen sprang from nowhere, half a dozen little oily-looking Levantine types who ran around doing busy things with lines and capstans. Surprisingly, a Hairy Man emerged from the depths of the boat: squat, thick-bodied, heavy-jawed, with hardly any chin and great jutting brows. He was wearing Roman costume. You found them in the most unlikely places, those harsh-voiced beings out of the dawn of time, from that lost and forgotten world before the Flood. This one appeared to be in the service of Sulla, judging by his dress and the decorations he was wearing.

Sulla came out next, leaning on Herod's arm: a balding, portly, fleshy-faced man, his face mottled with red blotches, his eyes red-rimmed from too much wine and too little sleep. The dictator of Pompeii was known to be a man much given to the excesses of the body; and yet you could see the power of his spirit within the flab and behind the blotches, you could see the iron strength of soul, the unwavering hunger for power. That hunger had survived Sulla's own life. It was a pity, Gilgamesh thought, that a man of Sulla's caliber wasn't able to transcend his own lustful appetites. Gilgamesh knew something about appetite himself, and about lust and excess; but he had never allowed it to show on the surface the way this man did. His body was his temple and throughout his life he had kept it holy. And throughout his long death-life too.

"Ah," Sulla said. "The king of Uruk. Well, there's Pompeii, just a few hundred yards off our bow. Your first glimpse of my little city. What do you think of it, Gilgamesh?"

"It is not without merit," said Gilgamesh.

"Not without merit? Is that the best you can say of it, king of Uruk?" Sulla's red blotches deepened to angry scarlet. Then, in a softer, more diplomatic tone, he said, "But of course my Pompeii is as nothing beside your great capital. I understand that."

"Your city is most splendid," Gilgamesh said.

In truth he had almost begun to forget the look of Uruk in all this time. The details of construction and design were going from him; about all he remembered were general outlines, low brick buildings with flat

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roofs, narrow streets, a temple high upon a platform of whitewashed brick. Which was the way Hell's own cities too had looked, or some of them, at any rate, when first he had come here. But that was all so long ago, and everything was changed now. This Pompeii was a place of narrow spires set with bands of precious stones, parapets that went curving off at improbable angles, boulevards that wound in eye-baffling zigs and zags up the slopes of the lava-rimmed mountain that dominated the island. A gaudy place indeed, no doubt much transformed over time from the simple old Roman town after which it had been originally modeled. Nothing stayed the same in Hell for very long. Not even the mountains and rivers.

Sulla said, "My prime minister, the Jew Herod."

"We have met," said Gilgamesh.

So Herod, for all his pious disclaimer of interest in power, nevertheless was prime minister here? Well, perhaps that was his way of—what was the phrase he had used?—*doing his own thing*. Let others be the kings here, he had said, but nevertheless he had managed to worm his way into a high enough position among these Romans. Gilgamesh was reminded of that Mongol, Kublai Khan, whom he had encountered while he was wandering the kingdoms of the Outback. The tale was that Kublai in his time on Earth had been one of the grandest of emperors; but here he claimed to have no imperial ambitions and avowed himself quite content to serve as minister of war for Mao Tse-tung's Celestial People's Republic. Which was easier than being an emperor, no doubt: but it was still a position of power.

It seemed that your life on Earth determined the way you lived here. Perhaps it was so. The mountains and rivers might be in constant flux and transition here, but human souls, so it seemed, never really changed. Look at all those Achaean Greeks, off there somewhere still fighting and refighting their absurd little Trojan War. Or that little man Ché Guevara, feverishly launching plot and crazy counterplot in his endless pointless insurrection against the invisible and probably nonexistent demonic rulers of Hell. And all the kings and emperors trying to replicate their ancient realms in this other world, Caesar and Mao and Elizabeth and Prester John and the rest. This soldierly Sulla, reconstructing his Pompeii right down to the volcano that once destroyed it. Even those like Herod and Kublai who claimed to have renounced the lust for power tended to turn up somehow among those people who gave the orders rather than among those who took them.

No, Gilgamesh thought, no one ever truly changes in Hell.

Except me. Except me. I was the king of all the Land, and gloried in my mastery, and made all men bow to me. I conquered cities; I erected temples; I built walls and canals. Here I have done nothing for untold

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thousands of years but hunt and roam, roam and hunt, and it has been sufficient for me. Whether they will believe it or no, it has been sufficient.

"And this," said Sulla, "is my grand mage and high wizard, whose name, of course, I am unable to tell you."

He indicated the Hairy Man.

"Peace and gladness, king of Uruk," said the Hairy Man. Or so Gilgamesh thought. He never had an easy time understanding the speech of those peculiar folk. Like everyone else here now they spoke English, and before that they had spoken Greek when Greek was the main language of Hell; but whatever language they spoke, they spoke it in a deep, gruff, furry, all but incomprehensible way, as though speaking through a thick stack of oxhides and as though their tongues were attached the wrong way on. Perhaps they spoke their own language that way, too.

The Hairy Men were mysteries to Gilgamesh. They had no names, or at least none that they would tell to anyone not of their own kind. They worshipped gods without names, too. They looked almost like beasts, covered as they were with dense coarse shaggy pelts of brown—or, more usually, reddish—fur. Enkidu was famed among men for his rough thick-haired body, but even he, shaggy as he was, seemed nearly as hairless as a woman beside a Hairy Man. Bestial though they looked and sounded, however, they conducted themselves as men among men, and when you spent a little time with them you quickly came to see that they were shrewd and wise, with deep cunning and a mastery of many arcane skills.

The tale was that they came from the beginning of time, in those early days before the Flood, when the kingship of men first descended from heaven. Maybe so. But once when Gilgamesh had questioned one about those days, asking him what he knew of Alulim the first king who had reigned at holy Eridu, or Alalgar his successor, or En-men-lu-Anna who had been king after him with his capital at the city of Bad-tibira, the Hairy Man had simply shaken his head.

"These are only names," the Hairy Man had said. "Names are nothing."

"They are kings! Alulim was king for 28,800 years! Alalgar for 36,000! In Bad-tibira En-men-lu-Anna ruled for 43,200 years! Every boy learns of them in school. And you who lived before the Flood, you who come from deepest antiquity—how could you not know the names of the kings?"

"They were not kings to me," the Hairy Man had replied indifferently. "They were never. They were nothing." Or so he seemed to be saying, in his thick-tongued indistinct way. And when Gilgamesh had asked other Hairy Men about the same matters, the answers that he got from them were always the same.

Well, perhaps they had forgotten. It was such a long time, after all. Before the Flood! Or could it be that the Hairy Men were not men at all, but demons native to this other world? Nowhere in the books that Gil-

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gamesh had studied when he was king in Uruk had he ever seen it said that in the days before the Flood men had looked like beasts. A mystery, yes. Maybe while he was in Pompeii he would attempt to learn more on these matters from this mage of Sulla's.

Looking shoreward Gilgamesh beheld slaves bustling around at the pier, some waving flags to guide the royal yacht into its slip, others unrolling an astonishingly long magenta carpet for Sulla. A trio of gunners detonated bright smoke-bombs, perhaps as a salute to the returning monarch and perhaps just to scare off the evil-looking winged creatures with scaly yellow necks and long glistening fangs that flew in wild circles, flapping and screaming over the harbor.

Sulla said, "A few days to rest and enjoy the baths, yes, king of Uruk? A feast, a theatrical show, a circus in your honor with a hundred gladiators. And then we must get down to business, and discuss the expedition to find the kingdom that by rights is yours."

Gilgamesh frowned. "But I covet no—"

Herod nudged him quickly to silence.

"What's that you say, great king?" Sulla asked.

He needed no further warnings from Herod. "I said, How good it will be to enjoy your baths, Sulla. The feasting, the theatricals, the gladiators."

"And then to search for your city of Uruk, eh?"

Gilgamesh made no reply. Serenely the royal yacht glided into its slip. Swarms of slaves and sycophants rushed forward to greet Sulla.

To search for Uruk, Gilgamesh thought. *What* Uruk? Where? Uruk was lost in the swirling mists of time. There would never be another Uruk. What he wanted was Enkidu, who had been carried off or perhaps even slain by that scuttling bunch of gun-wielding drug-running New Dead who had followed them here, even to the end of the Outback and beyond. He would accept Sulla's help in finding Enkidu, yes. But Uruk? Uruk?

"You will enjoy our circus," said Herod at his side. "In your honor we will send the hundred mightiest gladiators of Pompeii to the Undertaker."

Gilgamesh gave him a sour look. "That matters little to me. Why should a hundred heroes die for my amusement? You Romans and your bloody games—"

"Please," said Herod. "You keep calling me a Roman, but actually I prefer to think of myself as a Jew, you know. Although technically I suppose I could be thought of as a Roman—Julius Caesar did make my great-grandfather Antipater a Roman citizen, after all—but we Jews have a far more ancient lineage than the Romans, after all, and—"

"Do you ever stop running off at the mouth?" Gilgamesh burst out.

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"Have I given offense, great king?"

"This chatter of Jews and Romans, Romans and Jews. Who gives a demon's fart about you or your lineage? I was a king when your land was nothing but a swamp!"

Herod smiled. "Ah, Gilgamesh, Gilgamesh, forgive me! Of course your nation is far older than Rome, or even Judaea. But then again, there are others here to whom even grand and glorious Sumer is but a recent event." He looked slyly toward the Hairy Man. "Under the specter of Eternity, Gilgamesh, most of us have been in Hell only an hour or two. Next to *him,* that is. But forgive me. Forgive me. I do speak too much. Nevertheless I urge you to attend the contests in our coliseum. And I bid you welcome to my adopted city of Pompeii, King Gilgamesh. Both as Roman and as Jew do I bid you be welcome here."

3.

In Pompeii Gilgamesh took up residence in Sulla's palace, a huge rambling building laid out around a courtyard and set in an enormous walled garden. His suite had a bath in the Roman style, a vast circular bed that somehow seemed to float in mid-air, and its own staff of valets, butlers, courtesans, and sycophants to meet his every need. Just at the moment he felt very few needs, a general austerity having been his mode for more years than he could remember. But it was good to know those comforts were there, he supposed.

Herod came to him in early evening, when the murky glow of Paradise was beginning to tint the garden with the deep purples of twilight. He perched casually on a windowsill and said, "Tell me about this Uruk of yours."

"What can I tell? It was a city long ago, where I was born and lived and was king and—died. The River Buranunu ran along its flank. Enlil was the god of the city and Inanna its goddess, and—"

"No. I mean the new Uruk, that is here in Hell."

"I know nothing of any such city," said Gilgamesh.

Herod studied him closely. "Sulla thinks you do."

"He does? Whatever I know of the new Uruk, which is very little, I've learned from Sulla."

"Ah. I begin to see."

"The first I heard of it," Gilgamesh said, "was when I encountered Sulla across the bay in the land of the flaming mountains. There is a city called Uruk in Hell, he told me. He told me that this Uruk is a city much like the city of my life, and there are people of my kin there. This Uruk, he said, is a city of fabulous wealth and enormous treasure."

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"Yes. The true picture does come into focus now," said Herod.

"He asked if I would join him in an expedition to Uruk. His soldiers, he said, are bored and seek adventure."

"And also he seeks treasure."

"The treasure of Uruk?"

"Any treasure," Herod said. "Have you looked at the walls and towers of this city? He's encrusted Pompeii with emeralds and rubies and sapphires and diamonds. And gems the names of which no one knows, which were never seen on Earth but are found only in Hell. His appetite for such decoration is enormous. Five wizards conjure more stones into existence for him all day long and all the night; but of course those stones last only a short while. He craves the genuine article. If Uruk has great treasure, Sulla hungers for it."

"I took him for a wiser man."

"There is much wisdom in him. But this is Hell, Gilgamesh, where the decay of time turns wise men to folly. He loves bright stones."

"There were no stones at all in Uruk," Gilgamesh pointed out. "We built our city from bricks made of mud. We had neither emeralds nor rubies."

"That was your Uruk. Sulla means to find Hell's Uruk. He thinks you know the way."

"I told him that I did not."

"He thinks you lie," said Herod amiably.

"Then he's an even greater fool. I've been in Hell twice as long as your Sulla, or even longer. Doesn't he think that in all that time I'd have heard of it, if my countrymen had built a new Uruk for themselves here?"

Herod rocked slowly back and forth on the windowsill, smiling to himself. "You two have really screwed each other over, haven't you?"

"What do you mean?"

"The valiant Gilgamesh and the shrewd Sulla have led each other ass-deep into confusion. He believes you can find Uruk for him. You believe he can find it for you. Each of you thinks the other one holds the secret of Uruk's location. But in fact neither of you knows anything at all about the place."

"I certainly don't, at any rate."

"Neither does Sulla. I assure you."

"Then how—"

"Some wandering swindler came to him a little while ago. One Hanno, a Carthaginian, claiming to be a maker of maps. You know how reliable maps are in Hell, Gilgamesh? But this Hanno began telling tales of the treasures of Uruk, and Sulla's eyes lit up like the jewels he covets so hungrily. Where can I find this Uruk, Sulla asked. And Hanno sold him a map. Then he disappeared. When Romans start buying maps from

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Carthaginians no good can come of it, I say. The day after Hanno left Pompeii, Sulla proudly brought me the map and told me the story. Let us plan an expedition of conquest, he said. And unrolled the map. And its lines ran crazily in every direction, so that it would make your eyes ache to follow them, and even as we stared they flowed and twisted about. And then in five minutes the map was blank, just an empty piece of demon-hide. I thought Sulla would have a stroke. Uruk! Uruk! That was all he could say, over and over, grunting like that Hairy Man wizard of his. Then off we went to the mainland, where some caravan had arrived from the Outback, scoundrels and villains of some sort, dealers in drugs. Sulla had business with them. He's mixed up in all sorts of garbage of that kind. I don't have to pay any attention to it. And what do we hear but that there are two gigantic hulking Sumerians traveling with the caravan, and one of them is Gilgamesh the king of Uruk! Uruk again! Do you see, Gilgamesh? He means for you to lead him to Uruk!"

"Sooner would I be able to lead him to Paradise. There is no Uruk here in Hell, Herod."

"Are you certain of that?"

"Who can be certain of anything here? But why haven't I ever heard of it, if it truly exists?"

"Hell is very large, Gilgamesh. It may hold everyone who has ever lived, and yet it is not at all crowded and there are enormous open reaches. I've traveled in it for twice a thousand years and I haven't even seen a tenth of it, I suspect. And you, much older even than I—even you, I wager, are a stranger to much of Hell. You told me yourself that you had never been in Pompeii before."

"Agreed. But Uruk—a city built by Sumerians, inhabited by Sumerians—no. Impossible that it could exist without my knowing of it."

"Unless you knew of it once, and have forgotten that you did."

"Also impossible."

"Is it?"

"There is no Uruk in Hell," said Gilgamesh sullenly. "Accept the truth of that or not as you like, King Herod. But *I* know where the truth lies in this matter."

"Merely a fable, then?"

"Absolutely. A phantom of this Hanno's imagination."

"Why would he name his phantom Uruk, which time itself has forgotten?"

"Who knows? Perhaps he met me once, and the name stuck in his mind. I am well known in Hell, Herod."

"So in truth you are."

"There is no Uruk. Sulla deceives himself. If he thinks I know how to lead him there, he deceives himself doubly."

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Herod was silent a long moment.

At length he said, "Then answer me this, Gilgamesh. If this place really doesn't exist, why have you agreed to join Sulla in an expedition to find a nonexistent place?"

"Because," said Gilgamesh carefully, "the thought came to me that it might just exist after all."

Herod's eyes widened in amazement. "What? You told me yourself two minutes ago that there was no way for it to exist without your knowing about it!"

"This is Hell," said Gilgamesh. "Nothing is ever as we expect it to be here. There was Sulla, telling me that he has heard wondrous tales of Uruk. It sounded crazy to me, that there should be any such place, but what if I was wrong about that? As you said, Hell is large beyond anyone's comprehension. For all I knew, Uruk did perhaps exist somewhere far off in this incomprehensible place and through some fluke I had never heard of it. Now the powerful dictator Sulla was offering me a chance to go searching for it. Why should I refuse? What did I have to lose?"

"The only information that Sulla had about Uruk was absolute nonsense. He was gambling that you could fill in the blanks on his map for him."

"I wasn't aware of that."

"He meant to use you. He'd let you take him to Uruk, where he could get his hands on all those strongboxes full of precious gems that Hanno said were there. And in return he'd set you up as Uruk's king."

"As you know, I have no wish to be king of any city. Particularly one that doesn't exist."

"But Sulla doesn't know that. He thought you'd jump at the chance."

"I told you. I want only Enkidu."

"Your missing friend, you mean?"

"My friend. My hunting companion. My true brother. Closer to me than any brother could be."

"And where might he be?"

"Gone. A mystery. He was with me on the mainland—and then he was gone. The others in our camp were all dead, horribly butchered, no one left alive at all, only this dog Ajax. But of Enkidu's body there was no trace. Vanished into the sky, it would seem, or into the bowels of the earth. He would never have fled a battleground; so he must have been carried off."

"By whom?"

"I have no idea. But I mean to search for him."

"Even though you have about as much chance of finding him as you do of finding Uruk?"

"At least I know that Enkidu exists."

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"But he could be anywhere. A million miles away. Ten million. He could be dead. Who knows? You could look for a thousand years and never find him again."

Shrugging, Gilgamesh said, "I have lost him before, and eventually found him. I'll find him again: and if it takes me a thousand years, Herod, so be it. What's a thousand years to me? What's ten thousand?"

"And meanwhile?"

"Meanwhile what?"

"Uruk," Herod said. "What do you plan to do about that, now that you know Sulla's been bluffing you? Will you go along with him anyway on this lunatic expedition? With him hoping that you really do know the way—or at least can figure it out somehow—and you absolutely sure that there's no such place, but praying that somehow you'll get to it anyway?"

Herod's waspish buzzing was beginning to bother Gilgamesh again. The little man was constantly probing, pushing, maneuvering. For what purpose?

Gilgamesh walked to the window and loomed over him.

"Why are you so concerned about the Uruk journey, Herod?"

"Because it means nothing but trouble for me."

"Trouble for you? Why for you?"

"If Sulla takes off on a crusade to God knows where with you, I'm going to be stuck here running the shop until he gets back. Which could be centuries, and me trying to preside over this madhouse all the while. His viceroy, do you see? The regent, while he's gone. Do you think I'm looking forward to that? Pompeii is stacked to the rafters with crazy heroes, most of them oversized and mentally underfurnished, who'd like nothing better than to kill me, or you, or each other, and if they aren't enough trouble there are all these sorcerers, too, turning the air blue with their incantations, a great many of which unfortunately are quite potent. I'd go out of my mind without Sulla here to keep a lid on everything."

"If being regent of Pompeii would be such a burden for you, King Herod, you could always come with us to Uruk."

"Fine! Much better! March day and night for a hundred years through the demon wilderness looking for some place that isn't even there!"

"And if it is there?"

"And if it isn't?"

Gilgamesh felt himself losing the last of his patience. "Well, then move somewhere else! You don't have to stay in Pompeii. Get yourself a villa in New Hell, or have one of the Outback princes take you in. You could settle with the Israelis, for that matter. They're Jews like you, aren't they?"

"Jews, yes," said Herod dourly. "But not like me. I don't understand

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them at all. No, Gilgamesh, I don't want to do any of those things. I like it here. Pompeii is my home. I've got a sweet little niche here. I have no desire whatever to live anywhere else. But if Sulla—"

The ground rumbled suddenly as if monsters were rising beneath the tiled mosaic floor of Sulla's palace.

"What's that?" Gilgamesh asked.

"Vesuvius!" cried Herod. He turned toward the window and stared out into the dusk. The ground shook a second time, more fiercely than before, and there was a tremendous roar. Gilgamesh plucked the little man aside and leaned out the window. An eye-dazzling spear of red flame split the darkness. Another roar, another, another: like the angry growls of some great beast struggling to break free. From the crest of the mighty volcano in the center of the city came cascades of bubbling lava, showers of pumice, choking clouds of dense black smoke: and throughout it all that single fiery scarlet lance kept rising and rising. Fearless though he was, Gilgamesh had to throttle back a reflexive impulse to run and hide.

Hide? Where? Here on the slopes of that dread volcano there was no safety anywhere to be found.

"Let me see!" Herod said, tugging at Gilgamesh's arm. He was panting. His face was streaked with sweat. He forced his way past Gilgamesh's elbow and thrust his head forth to have a better view. There came another world-shaking convulsion underground. "Fantastic!" Herod whispered. "Incredible! This is the best one ever!" There was awe in his voice, and reverence. Slowly it was dawning on Gilgamesh that this eruption was arousing extraordinary delight in Herod. He looked transfigured. His eyes were aglow, shining; and there seemed to be an almost sexual excitement throbbing in him. He seemed almost crazed with ecstasy. "Twice in two nights! Fantastic! Fantastic! Do you see why I could never leave this place, Gilgamesh? You've got to talk Sulla out of going off looking for Uruk. You've got to. I beg you!"

4.

Under the cloud-shrouded red light of Paradise Gilgamesh made his way through the daytime streets of Pompeii. By Enlil, had there ever been a city like this in all the world? There was witchcraft and deviltry everywhere.

Streets that wound in on themselves in tight spirals, like the spoor of a drunken snail. Narrow high-vaulted buildings that looked like snails themselves, ready to pick up and move away. Black-leaved trees with weeping boughs, from which came curious sighs when you got close to them. And everywhere the dry powdery smell of last night's eruption,

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motes of dark dust dancing in the air, and little sparkling bits of flaming matter that stung ever so lightly as they settled on your skin.

Hands plucked at him as he walked briskly along. Hooded eyes stared from passageways. Once someone called him by name, but he could see no one. Ajax, trotting along at his heels, paused again and again to howl and glare, and even to raise the fur along his back and spit as though he were a cat rather than a dog; but the enemies that Ajax perceived were all invisible to Gilgamesh.

Now and again flying fiery-eyed demons swooped through the city at rooftop height. No one paid any attention to them. Frequently they came to rest and perched, preening themselves like living gargoyles, beating their powerful wings against the air and sending down dank fetid breezes over the passersby below. Gilgamesh saw one of the winged things suddenly sway and fall, as though overcome by a spell. Little glossy scuttling creatures emerged from crevices in the gutter and pounced upon it. They devoured it before Gilgamesh had reached the end of the street, leaving nothing but scraps of leathery cartilage behind.

When he looked off in the distance it seemed to him that there was some sort of translucent wall in the sky beyond the city, cutting Pompeii off from the rest of Hell. Its blue-white sheen glimmered with cold ferocity; and it seemed to him that there were monstrous creatures outside, not the usual hell-creatures but some other kind of even greater loathsomeness, all crimson beaks and coiling snaky necks and vast wings that flailed in fury against the wall that kept them out. But when he blinked and looked again he saw nothing unusual at all, only the heavy clouds and the dark glimmer of the light of Paradise struggling to break through them.

Then he heard a sound that might have been the sound of a tolling bell. But the bell seemed to be tolling backward. First came the dying fall, and then the rising swell of sound, and then the initial percussive boom; and then silence, and then the dying fall again, climbing toward the clangor of the striking clapper:

mmmmmmoooMMMMNGB! mmmmmmoooMMMMNGB! B! mmmmmmoooMMMMNGB!

The impact of the sound was stunning. Gilgamesh stood still, feeling the immense weight of time drop away, centuries peeling from him with each heavy reverberation. As though on a screen before him in the air he saw his entire life in Hell running in reverse, the thousands of years of aimless wandering becoming a mad flight at fantastic speed, everything rushing in blurred and jumbled together as if it had happened in a single day, Gilgamesh here, Gilgamesh there, brandishing his sword, drawing his bow, slaying this devil-beast and that, climbing impossible mountains, swimming lakes of shimmering color, trekking across fields

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of blazing sand, entering cities that were twisted and distorted like the cities one enters in dreams, penetrating the far regions of this place even to the strangest region of all, in the north, where the great drifting ivory block-shaped creatures known as the Hoar Gods moved about on their mysterious tasks. Now he was wrestling joyously with Enkidu, now he watched the brawling swarms of New Dead come flooding in and filling the place with their noisy incomprehensible machines and their guns and their foul-smelling vehicles, now he was in the villa of Augustus in New Hell among Augustus' whole unsavory crew of cold-eyed conspirators and malevolent bitchy queens, and now he sat roistering in the feasting-hall of the Ice-Hunter king Vy-otin, with Enkidu laughing and joking by his side and Agamemnon, too, and Amenhotep and Cretan Minos, and Varuna the king of Meluhha, his great companions in those early days in Hell. How long ago that was! And now—

"Great king!" a woman cried, dashing up to him and clutching at his wrist. "Save us from doom, great king!"

Gilgamesh stared at her, amazed. Not a woman but a girl. And he knew her. Had known her, once. Had loved her, even. In another life, far away, long ago, on the other side of the great barrier of life and death. For her face was the face of the girl-priestess Inanna, she whom he had embraced so rashly and with such passion in old Uruk, in the life he had led before this life! During his long years in Hell he had thought more than once about encountering Inanna again, had even once or twice considered seeking her out, but he had never acted on the thought. And now, to blunder into her like this here in Pompeii—

Or was he still in Pompeii? Was this Hell at all?

Everything was swirling about him. A thick mist was gathering. The earth was giving up its moisture. It seemed to him that he saw the walls of Uruk rising at the end of the street, the huge white platform of the temples, the awesome statues of the gods. He heard the clamor of his name on a thousand thousand tongues. *Gilgamesh! Gilgamesh!* And in the sky, instead of the dull red glaring light that people here called Paradise, was the yellow sun of the Land that he had not beheld in so unimaginably long a time, blazing with all its midsummer power.

What was this? Had that tolling bell lifted him altogether out of this world and cast him back into the other, the world of his birth and death? Or was this only a waking dream?

"Inanna?" he said in wonder. How slender she was! How young! Strings of blue beads about her waist, amulets of pink shell tied to the ends of her hair. Her body bare, painted along its side and front with the pattern of the serpent. And her dark-tipped breasts—the sharp stinging scent of her perfume—

She spoke again, this time calling him by his name of names, the

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private name that no one had called him in thousands of years, since that day when he was still half a boy and he had put on the mantle of kingship and had for the first time heard his king-name roaring like a flooding river in his ears, *Gilgamesh, Gilgamesh, Gilgamesh.* He himself had forgotten that other name, that birth-name: but as she spoke it the dam of recollection burst in his soul. What wizardry was this, that he should be standing before the girl Inanna again?

"I am Ninpa the Lady of the Scepter," she murmured. "I am Ninmenna the Lady of the Crown."

She reached her hand toward his. As he touched her she changed: she was older now, fuller of body, her dark eyes gleaming with wanton knowledge, her deep-hued skin bright with oil. "Come," she whispered. "I am Inanna. You must come with me. You are the only one who can save us."

A dark tunnel before him—a buzzing in his ears, as of a thousand wasps about his head—a brilliant purple light glowing before his eyes—a mighty roaring, as though Enlil of the Storms had loosed all his winds upon Hell—

And then a fiery pain at his ankle. Ajax, sinking his fangs deep! Gilgamesh stared down at the dog, astonished.

"Careful, Gilgamesh!" Ajax barked. "This is enchantment!"

"What? What?"

The woman held him by the hand. Heat came from her, and it was overwhelming, a furnace heat. And she was changing, again and again; now she had his mother's face, and now she was the round-breasted temple-woman Abisimti who had first taught him the arts of love; and then she was the child-Inanna again, and then the woman. And then she was a thing with a hundred heads and a thousand eyes, pulling him down into the nether pits of Hell, into the yawning blackness that lay beneath the smouldering heart of the Vesuvius volcano.

"I am Ereshkigal of Hell," she whispered, "and I will be your bride."

Down—down—descending a ladder of lights—blinding whiteness all around, and a bright red mantle of copper fluttering in the breeze out of the pit, and demons dancing below. On all sides, lions. From high overhead, golden wine falling from two inverted wine-cups; and the wine was thick and fiery, and burned him where it touched him.

He heard the furious howling of the dog. He felt the terrible pull of the black depths.

"It is enchantment, Gilgamesh," said Ajax again. "Stay—fight—I will get help—"

The dog ran off, uttering terrible wolf-cries as he went.

Gilgamesh stood his ground, baffled, shaking his head slowly from side to side like a wounded bull. If only Enkidu were here! Enkidu would pull

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him back from the abyss, just as Gilgamesh once long ago had tried to bring Enkidu out of that tunnel of old dry bones that led to the land of the dead. He had failed, then, and Enkidu had perished; but they were older now, they were wiser, they knew how to deal with the demons that surrounded them on all sides—

Enkidu! Enkidu!

"You should not have come to this street alone," a new voice said. "There are many dangers here."

Enkidu, yes! At last! The dog Ajax had returned, and he had brought Enkidu with him to Gilgamesh's side. Gilgamesh felt his soul soaring. Saved! Saved!

Through blurred eyes he saw the powerful figure of his friend: the great muscles, the thick pelt of dark hair, the burning gleaming eyes. Enkidu was struggling with Ereshkigal-Inanna now. Shoving the hell-demon goddess back toward her pit, wresting her cold hands free of Gilgamesh's wrist. Gilgamesh trembled. He was helpless to act on his own behalf.

In all his years in Hell he had never known such peril, had never fallen so deeply into the power of the dark beings of the invisible world. But Enkidu was here—Enkidu would save him—

Enkidu was freeing him. Yes. Yes. The frightful chill of the abyss which had enfolded him was relenting. The blinding lights had receded. The temples and streets and sun of Uruk no longer could be seen. Gilgamesh stepped back, blinking, shivering. His heart was pounding in dull heavy thuds, almost like the tolling of that backwards bell. Tears were streaming down his face. He looked about for his friend.

"Enkidu?"

Through blurring eyes he saw the shaggy figure. Enkidu? Enkidu? No. The heavy pelt was like a beast's. A reddish color, and coarse and dense, letting none of the skin show through. And the face—that underslung chin, those fierce brooding ridges above the eyes—why, this was not Enkidu at all, but rather the Hairy Man who was Sulla's wizard. Or perhaps not, perhaps another of that tribe altogether—it was so difficult telling one Hairy Man from the next—

The very ugliness of the Hairy Man was comforting. The squat bulk of him, the solidity. This creature who had lived when the gods themselves were young, who had walked the earth in the days before the Flood, who had lived fifty thousand or a hundred thousand or a hundred hundred thousand years in Hell before Gilgamesh of Uruk first had come here. Ancient wisdom flowed deep in him. Next to him, Gilgamesh felt almost like a child again.

"Come with me," said the Hairy Man, thick-tongued, husky-voiced. "In here. You will be safe. You will be protected here."

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5.

It might have been some sort of warehouse. A huge dark long room, walls of white plaster, curved wooden ceiling far overhead. A single piercing beam of light cutting through from above, illuminating the intricacies of the rafters and slicing downward to show the sawdust-strewn floor, the rows of bare wooden tables, the hunched and somber figures sitting on backless benches behind them. They were staring straight forward and exclaiming aloud, each in the midst of uttering some private recitation, each ploughing stubbornly onward over the voices of all the others.

"I am Wulfgeat. For chronic disorder of the head or of the ears or of the teeth through foulness or through mucus, extract that which aileth there, seethe chervil in water, give it to drink, then that draweth out the evil humors either through mouth or through nose."

"I am Aethelbald. Seek in the maw of young swallows for some little stones, and mind that they touch neither earth, nor water, nor other stones; look out three of them; put them on the man, on whom thou wilt, him who hath the need, and he will soon be well."

"I am Eadfrith. Here we have rue, hyssop, fennel, mustard, elelcampane, southernwood, celandine, radish, cumin, onion, lupin, chervil, flower de luce, flax, rosemary, savory, lovage, parsley, olusatrum, savine."

In wonder and bewilderment Gilgamesh said, "Why, who are these people, and what's all this that they're babbling?"

"—again, thou shalt remove the evil misplaced humors by spittle and breaking; mingle pepper with mastic, give it the patient to chew, and work him a gargle to swill his jowl—"

"—they are good for headache, and for eye-wark, and for the fiend's temptations, and for night goblin visitors, and for the nightmare, and for knot, and for fascination, and for evil enchantments by song. It must be big nestlings on which thou shalt find them. If a man ache in half his head, pound rue thoroughly, put it into strong vinegar—"

The Hairy Man said, "These are dealers in remedies and spells, and this is the market where such things are sold in Pompeii."

"—and also mastic, pepper, galbanum, scamony, gutta ammoniaca, cinnamon, vermilion, aloes, pumice, quicksilver, brimstone, myrrh, frankincense, petroleum, ginger—"

"—that he by that may comfortably break out the ill phlegm. Work thus a swilling or lotion for cleansing of the head, take again a portion of mustard seed and of navew seed and of cress seed, and twenty peppercorns, gather them all with vinegar and honey—"

"—and smear therewith the head, right on top. Delve up waybroad

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without iron, ere the rising of the sun, bind the roots about the head, with crosswort, by a red fillet—"

Gilgamesh shivered. "I think this place is no better than being in the street. A marketplace of wizards? A hundred mages bellowing spells?"

"No harm can befall you here," the Hairy Man said. "There is such a constant crying-forth of magics in here that each cancels the other out, so there is no peril."

"—the seed of this wort administered in wine is of much benefit against any sort of snake, and against sting of scorpions, to that degree that if it be laid upon the scorpions, it bringeth upon them unmightiness or impotence and infirmity—"

"—for ache of loins and sore of the thighs, take this same wort pulegium, seethe it in vinegar—"

"I am Aethelbald."

"I am Eadfrith."

"I am Wulfgeat."

"—this wort, which is named priapiscus, and by another name vinca pervinca, is of good advantage for many purposes, that is to say, first against devil sicknesses, or demoniacal possessions, and against snakes, and against wild beasts, and against poisons—"

"Good sir! Good sir!" It was the one who said he was Aethelbald, waving wildly at Gilgamesh.

"What does he want with me?"

"To sell you something, no doubt," the Hairy Man replied. "Why were you wandering in these streets by yourself?"

"My head was aching when I awoke. From the noise of the eruptions all night long, and, I think, from some prattle of the Jew Herod last evening. So I went out to walk. To clear my head, to see the city. I saw no harm in it."

"—and for various wishes," shouted the one called Eadfrith, "and for envy, and for terror, and that thou may have grace, and if thou hast this sort with thee, thou shalt be prosperous, and ever acceptable—"

"Good sir! Here, good sir, here, if you please!"

"No harm? No harm?" The Hairy Man guffawed, showing huge chopper-like teeth. "No harm playing tag with a mastodon, either, eh, my friend? If you're big enough, I suppose. Walk right up to it, tweak it by the trunk, pull its ears? Eh?"

"A mastodon?" Gilgamesh said blankly. A strange word: he wondered if he had heard it right.

"Never mind. You wouldn't know, would you? Before your time. Never mind. But I tell you, this is no city to be strolling around in unprotected. Nobody warned you of that?"

"Herod said something about wizards and mages, but—"

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"Good sir! Good sir!"

"But you ignored him. Herod! That clown!" The small deep-set eyes of the Hairy Man were bright with contempt. "Sometimes even Herod will tell you something useful. You should have heeded his warning. Pompeii's a place of many perils."

"I have no fear of dying," said Gilgamesh.

"Dying is the least terrible thing that could happen to you here." The Hairy Man placed a wrinkle-skinned leathery-looking hand on Gilgamesh's arm. "Come. Here. Walk about with me a little, up and down."

"Do you have a name?"

"Names are nothing," said the Hairy Man. "It was a fright for you, what happened outside, eh?"

Gilgamesh shrugged.

The Hairy Man leaned close. There was an odd sweetish flavor about his furry body. "There are places in the streets here where the other worlds break through. That is always a danger, that the fabric will not hold, that other worlds will break through. Do you understand what I'm saying?"

"Yes," Gilgamesh told the Hairy Man. "There was such a place in Uruk. A passageway that ran down from our world into this one. Inanna the goddess descended through it, when she went to Hell to visit her sister Ereshkigal. And during the rite of the Closing of the Gate I dropped my drum and my drumstick into that passageway when a girl startled me by crying out the name of a god." He had not thought of these things in centuries. Recollection, flooding back now, swept him with uncontrollable emotion. "The sacred drum, it was, which Ur-nangar the craftsman made for me from the wood of the huluppu-tree, by which I entered my trances and saw the things that mortal eyes are unable to see. That was how I lost my friend Enkidu, the first time, when I dropped my drum and my drumstick into that dark and terrible hole of cinders and ashes, and he entered the nether world to bring them back."

"Then you know," the Hairy Man said. "You have to learn where these places are, and stay away from them."

Gilgamesh was trembling. Old memories were surging with new life within him.

Enkidu! Enkidu!

Once again he saw Enkidu, gray with dust and snarled in masses of tangled cobwebs, coming forth from that pit in Uruk that led down to the world of the dead; and Enkidu as he came forth was a dead man himself, shorn of all life-strength, who within twelve days would be carried off forever to the House of Dust and Darkness. How great had been the mourning of Gilgamesh! How he had cursed the gods of death for taking Enkidu from him! And then, after Gilgamesh's own time had

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run its course and he had joined Enkidu in Hell, losing him again—what pain it was, to be reunited with him and then to lose him that second time, when Enkidu had stepped between quarrelsome Spaniards and Englishmen and caught a bullet meant for someone else—

"And once more he is lost to me," Gilgamesh said aloud. "As though the curse of Inanna follows us even to Hell, and we must find each other and be parted again, and find each other once more, and part once more, over and over and over—"

"What is this you say?" asked the Hairy Man.

"We were on that far shore, Enkidu and I, among those strangers, those sleazy conniving New Dead, because Enkidu craved the new kinds of weapons those people had, and I think also he desired one of their women. And while I was gone from the camp, while I was down at the water's edge speaking with Sulla and his minions, there was an attack on the camp, and when I returned I found all of them dead except this brindle dog Ajax; but of Enkidu there was no sign. Demons must have swept him off, to torment me by separating us once again. But I will find him, if I must seek until the gods grow old!"

"In Hell there is no finding anyone," the Hairy Man said, "except by accident, or the whim of those who rule this place. You surely must know that."

"I will find him."

"And if he is dead?"

"Then he'll come back again, as all the dead here do sooner or later. I tell you I will find him."

"Come, now," said the Hairy Man. "Come and walk with me, until your head is clear."

"Wait," Gilgamesh said. He brushed the Hairy Man's hand aside. "Do you think that these doctors here could give me a spell that would help me trace him?"

"They will tell you they can. But in Hell there is no finding anyone, Gilgamesh."

"We'll see about that."

Gilgamesh went toward the rows of wooden tables and benches.

"Good sir, I am Aethelbald," said one of the merchants of spells eagerly.

"I am Eadfrith," said the one beside him, beckoning.

"I am Wulfgeat. I have here a drink that is good for giddiness and fever of the brain, for flowing gall and the yellow disease, for singing in the ears, and defective hearing—"

Gilgamesh impatiently waved them to silence. "Who are you people?"

"We are Angles here," said Wulfgeat, "except for this Saxon beside me, and masters of wortcunning and leechdom are we, and starcraft. Our work is substantial! Our skills are boundless!"

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"Wortcunning?" Gilgamesh said. "Starcraft?"

"Aye, and may it be that we have a spell for you! What is your need, good sir? What is your need?"

"There is a man for whom I search," said Gilgamesh after a moment. "A friend whom I have lost."

"A lost friend? A lost friend?" The spell-mongers began to murmur and confer among themselves. "Viper's bugloss?" suggested one. "The ash of dead bees, and linseed oil?" Another said, "Cammock and thung, wenwort and elder root, stepped in strong mead or clear ale." But the third shook his head violently and said, "It must be done by dreaming. The tokens must needs be induced. To see a well opened beside one's house, or a hen with chickens, or to be shod with a new pair of shoes—aye, those are the tokens, and we must give him the potion that brings on such visions as will be useful, and then the next night—"

"What is this?" a sudden familiar buzzing voice cut in. "What's going on here?"

Herod, pushing and shoving his way through the throng, appeared abruptly at Gilgamesh's side. The Hairy Man scowled and muttered something unintelligible beneath his breath. The merchants of spells looked alarmed, and turned away, gesticulating toward the opposite side of the building and loudly crying out the merits of their wares to those gathered over there.

"Where have you been?" Herod demanded. "Sulla's had people looking all over the place for you."

"I thought I would walk through the town."

"And came *here?* Ah. Ah, I know why. Shopping for a spell that'll lead you to Uruk, are you? Is that what you're up to? Despite everything I told you last night?"

From afar came the sound of a mighty voice crying, "The Book of the Fifty Names! Who will buy the Book of the Fifty Names?"

"The Hairy Man brought me in here," Gilgamesh said. "I was simply wandering from one street to another when something strange happened to me, a fit, perhaps—in the days when I lived on Earth I was subject to fits, you know, though I thought I was exempt from that in Hell—and I grew dizzy—I saw faces—I saw ancient streets—" Angrily he shook his head. "No, I'm not trying to buy a spell for finding Uruk. Enkidu is what I seek. And if these wizards—"

"Marduk! Marukka! Marutukku!" roared the mighty voice.

"These wizards are fishmongers and rabble," Herod said scornfully, making the sign of the horns at Aethelbald and Eadfrith and Wulfgeat. They shrank back from him. "Peasants is what they are. Shopkeepers, at the very best." He drew the six-pointed star in the air before them and they turned from him, pale and shaken. "You see? You see, Gilga-

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mesh? What can they do? Cure an ague for you, maybe? Stop up a sniveling nose? These are foolish men here. They will not find your Enkidu for you."

"Can you be sure of that, Herod?"

A crafty look came into Herod's eyes as he peered up at Gilgamesh.

"King of Uruk, if I show you a true wizard who will give you the answer you seek, will you abandon the idea of taking Sulla off on this insane expedition?"

The Hairy Man's yellow-rimmed eyes widened in surprise. "You speak of Calandola?" he asked in his thickest, harshest tone.

"Calandola, yes," said Herod.

The Hairy Man scowled, twisting up his ape-like jaw and lowering his brows until he seemed almost to be winking, and emitted a rumbling sound from deep within his cavernous chest. "This is unwise," he said, after a time. "This is most unwise."

Herod glared at him. "Let Gilgamesh be the judge of that!"

"Asaraludu!" boomed the caller of the Fifty Names. "Namtillaku! Narilugaldimmerankia!"

"And who is this great wizard you offer me?" Gilgamesh asked.

"Imbe Calandola is his name," said Herod. "A Moor, he is—no, a Nubian, or something of each, perhaps. Black as night, terrible to behold. He maintains a temple in the dark tunnels far below the streets of Pompeii, and there he presides over the giving of visions. There are those who think he is the Lord of Darkness himself, the Prince of Hell, the Great Adversary, the vast Lucifer of the Abyss: Satan Mephistopheles Beelzebub, the Archfiend, the King of Evil. Perhaps he is; but I think he is in truth only a great savage, who knows the wisdoms of the jungle. In either case he will tell you what you wish to know. The Hairy Men, I understand, consult him frequently."

Gilgamesh looked toward the ancient one.

"Is this true?"

The Hairy Man scowled again, screwing up his face even more bizarrely than before.

"He sees into the other worlds, yes, this Calandola. And he can make others see what he sees."

"Then I mean to go to him," said Gilgamesh.

"There are dangers," the Hairy Man warned.

"So you frequently tell me. But what need I fear? Death? You know that death is a joke to one who has already met it once!"

"Have I not said already that death is the least terrible thing to be feared in Pompeii?"

"You have said that, yes. But what you say means nothing to me."

"Then go to Calandola."

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"I will do that," Gilgamesh said. He turned to Herod. "How soon can you bring me before him?"

"Do we have a deal? I take you to Calandola, you persuade Sulla to abandon the idea of going off in search of Uruk?"

It was maddening to be haggled with this way, as though he and Herod were tradesmen striking a bargain in the marketplace. With difficulty Gilgamesh resisted the urge to pick the little Judaean up and hurl him across the vast room.

"Let there be no talk of favors for favors," said Gilgamesh icily. "I am a man of honor. That's all that should concern you. Take me to this wizard of yours."

6.

Downward then they went, down into the depths, down into demon country, down into the tunnels of the devils, where the light of Paradise never was seen, where this black and monstrous Imbe Calandola had his dwelling-place.

When he was still a boy in Uruk, a slave wearing the badge of the goddess Inanna had come to Gilgamesh one day as he practiced the throwing of the javelin, and had said to him, "You will come now to the temple of the goddess." And the slave had conducted him to the temple that his grandfather Enmerkar had built on the platform of white brick, and down through winding passageways he had never seen before, into mysterious tunnels that descended beneath the white platform toward the depths of the earth. Past hallways where distant lamps glowed in the subterranean dark, and places where magicians did their work by candleglow, and crosspassages that afforded him glimpses of shaggy goat-hooved demons silently going about their tasks, until at last he had come to the secret room of Inanna herself, far below the sun-baked streets of Uruk.

That had been long ago, in the days of his life. It had been his first glimpse of the worlds that lie beneath the world, where invisible wings flutter and the sound of scratchy laughter echoes in dusty corridors. That day the young Gilgamesh had learned that there was more to the world than its familiar surface: that layer upon layer of mystery existed, far from the sight of ordinary mortals. Again and again he had entered that lower world in the course of his kingship. And Enkidu, too, had gone into it once, to his cost; for it was the breaching of the hidden mysteries that had deprived him of his life, that time he had gone down into the pit of darkness to fetch Gilgamesh his drum and drumstick.

Now here in Hell, where nothing ever was familiar and mystery was

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everywhere, Gilgamesh found himself descending once more into a world beneath the world.

He had discovered long ago that Hell had its own subterranean region, a Hell beneath Hell, a land of tunnels and passageways of unfathomable dimensions and incomprehensible complexity. In the early years of the days of his death he had prowled those tunnels, for then he was still in the grip of the insatiable curiosity that once had driven him to the ends of the earth; but he had quickly lost interest in such explorations, as the aimlessness and passivity of his Hell-life had settled upon him, and this was his first descent into the tunnels in an eon and a half, or more.

There were those who believed that a way out of Hell lay through those tunnels. Gilgamesh doubted that. To him it was meaningless to speak of a way out of Hell; to those who had come to dwell in it, Hell was forever, Hell was eternal. Some, he knew, had gone down into the tunnels and had never emerged. But to Gilgamesh that did not mean they had found a way out, only that they were lost in some doubly nether Hell, perhaps the House of Dust and Darkness itself, that terrible place of which the priests in Uruk had told, where the dead were clad like birds and sadly trailed their feathers in the dust. Gilgamesh had no yearning to go down into that forlorn land of unending night.

But now—for the sake of finding out where Enkidu had gone this time—

Down. Down. Herod's torch flickered and sputtered. The air was thick and oppressive here. There was the taste of fire in it. In the dimness Gilgamesh saw hideous scenes carved on the tunnel walls, that made his eyes throb and pound. It was all he could do to tear his gaze away from those dreadful pictures.

The tunnels curved and twisted, now plunging almost straight down, now rising in steep ramps. They crossed one another and seemed to blend and meld, and then to split apart again, so that it was all but impossible to remember which path they had originally been bound upon. Herod seemed to know the way, but even he was baffled now and again, and turned to the Hairy Man, who would gesture brusquely with one finger, jabbing the long dagger of his fingernail in the right direction: this way, this, this. No one spoke. They encountered few others in the tunnels. Occasionally demon-sounds reverberated in the distance: cacklings, screechings, hissings, moanings.

And then music: a dreadful barbaric drumming, with the jabbing shriek of flutes or fifes rising above it.

"The house of Calandola lies just beyond," said Herod.

"What must I do as we enter?" asked Gilgamesh.

"Stand upright. Show no fear. Meet him eye to eye."

Gilgamesh laughed. "That will be no great task."

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"Wait," Herod said. "Tell me that five minutes from now."

The tunnel swung abruptly to the left, and Gilgamesh found himself staring into a secondary tunnel, long and narrow and lit only by the faintest of star-gleams. The only way to enter it seemed to be through an opening hardly suitable for a dwarf. "In here," Herod said, clambering through. Gilgamesh, crouching, had to shuffle in on his knees, crawling at an angle, first this shoulder, then that. The Hairy Man followed.

Beyond the one narrow point of light that illuminated the opening, the darkness within was like a night within night: blackness upon blackness, so stark and deep that it struck the eyes like the hammering of fists. Gilgamesh was stunned by the depth of that darkness. He understood now for the first time what it must be like to be blind.

"This way," Herod said confidently. "Follow me!"

And what if a fathomless pit yawned before them on the path, with boiling oil or colossal serpents waiting at the bottom? What if swinging scythes were to reach forth from the sides of the tunnel to disembowel any comers who passed close by? What if swords on tripwires hung overhead, ready to descend and cleave? He could see nothing. He must surrender himself totally to faith.

And yet, and yet, being blind in this fashion, other senses came into play—

He could hear Herod's Roman robe rustling on the heavy air. He felt the tread of Herod's sandal-shod feet pattering against the ground. The skin of his cheeks and forehead told him of the breeze that Herod's movements created. Like a hunter tracking his prey in the night Gilgamesh read all these signs, and more, and followed along without fear or hesitation.

The tunnel narrowed until it pressed like a clammy fist on all sides. The tunnel widened until it became a vast echoing cavern. The tunnel narrowed again. It dipped; it rose; it twisted about and about. And abruptly it delivered them into an immense deep-shadowed room irregularly lit by smouldering torches set in brazen sconces, a room of angles, where ceiling met walls in a manner that oppressed and bewildered the eye. And toward the center of the room there sat enthroned a man of immense presence and authority who could only have been the great sorcerer Imbe Calandola, of whom it was rumored in Hell that he was the Archfiend, the King of Evil, the true Lucifer, the Lord of Darkness.

Gilgamesh saw at once that this was not so. He knew with one glance that this Calandola was neither god nor demon nor devil, but a man of human flesh and blood, such as he was himself, or had been when he had lived. But having perceived that, Gilgamesh perceived also in that same moment that the man before whom he stood was one who was

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extraordinary in the extreme. Who, mortal though he might have been, might well have the blood of gods in him.

As did Gilgamesh, who had known from childhood that he was two parts god and one part mortal, which was the source of his great stature and the depth of his wisdom. Though none of that had spared him from dying and coming to make his home these long years in Hell.

"Stand and give obedience," a deep rumbling voice commanded out of the shadows behind Calandola's throne. "Yield yourselves, strangers, for you are in the presence of the great Jaqqa, Imbe Calandola."

Gilgamesh stared, and felt an emotion as close to awe as anything he could remember feeling in five thousand years.

The blackness of Calandola was like the blackness of Calandola's tunnel: a blackness upon blackness, the blackness of a void without suns, a blackness so intense that it seemed to suck light from all that was around it. Black-skinned men had not been unknown to Gilgamesh in his life before Hell. In his wanderings in distant places he had seen the flat-nosed thick-lipped woolly-haired sailors of the kingdom of Punt, who came from a land in the south where the air was like fire and darkened the skins of those who lived there. From far-off Meluhha had come other black ones with thin noses and lips, and long straight hair so dark it was nearly blue.

And in Hell itself he had encountered many who were black in one of these fashions or another, from lands whose names meant nothing to him—Nigeria, Ethiopia, Nubia, Mali, Quiloa, India, Socotra, Zanzibar, and many more. Perhaps there were blacks in every part of the world, as also there were yellows and reds and browns, and, for all Gilgamesh knew, blue and green and piebald ones, each kept in a Hell of their own. But he had never seen anyone like Calandola.

His skin had the blackness of the people of Punt but his nose was straight and his lips were narrow and harsh, something like the features of the men of Meluhha and India, though they were small men and this Calandola was huge, a giant verging on the great size of Gilgamesh himself. His hair was thick and long and curling and there were seashells woven into it, and around his neck was a collar of large shells of a different kind, that stood out like twisted turrets. A strip of glittering copper as long as a man's small finger was thrust through his nose, and two more such strips dangled from his ears. His loins were clothed in a swath of brilliant scarlet cloth, but the rest of his massive body was bare. Red and white designs had been painted down his sides; and where he was not painted, his skin had been cut and carved and otherwise tormented into astonishing raised welts, some sort of monstrous decoration, that had the form of flowers and knots and lines. His skin also was oiled to a high gloss, so that reflections of the torchlight gleamed on him.

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And his eyes—!

Gods! Enlil and Enki and Inanna, what eyes!

They were black and bright and deep, pools of utter darkness set in fields of dazzling white. Gilgamesh knew them at once for the eyes of a true king. They were eyes that could seize and hold, eyes that could beat and oppress. Eyes that could charm if they had to, eyes that could kill.

Gilgamesh felt no fear, for fear was a thing he had never been taught to know. But he felt a deep awe and a strange admiration. He knew that he was in the presence of one who was his equal in strength and force; and that was not an experience he had often had, neither in Hell nor out of it.

Who was this man? Where had he reigned in life? Why did he dwell now in this cavern beneath Pompeii in the depths of Hell?

Calandola rose. Stepped down from his throne, took a few slow steps toward Gilgamesh. There was a curious dark odor about him, a sour reek, which Gilgamesh suspected came from the oil that made his body shine. He moved with extreme deliberation, calm and measured and sure. It became apparent now that Calandola was not as tall as Gilgamesh by half a head; but then, few men were. His look of great size he owed to the massiveness of his neck and the mighty breadth of his shoulders and the power of his upper arms, which were as thick as thighs.

He nodded in a sniffing way at the Hairy Man, and shrugged at the trembling, fawning Herod. To Gilgamesh he said in a voice that seemed to rise from some tunnel beneath even this tunnel, "Why have you come to me?"

"I have questions, and they say that you have answers."

"I know where answers may be found, yes. Give me your hand."

And he put forth his own, extending it palm upward. It was dark below and pink in the palm, and its span was enormous, enough to have allowed him to take a man's head in his grasp and squeeze it to a ruin. Gilgamesh, after a moment, placed his hand outspread atop Calandola's, and waited. The outermost two of Calandola's thick black fingers closed in on the sides of Gilgamesh's hand and dug deep, and deeper still, until Gilgamesh could feel a faint stirring of pain, and the bones beginning to move around. A test of endurance? Very well. It was childish, but Gilgamesh would accept it. He withstood the terrible clamping pressure of those two fingers as though he were being stroked with feathers; and when the pain became too intense, he sent the pain from him as one might banish an annoying fly.

A vein stood out now on Calandola's gleaming forehead. The strange ornamentation of raised scars that had been carved upon his skin appeared to rise still higher, and to throb and pulse. The two fingers pressed inward even more fiercely. Unflinching, Gilgamesh looked down with

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indifference at his hand and Calandola's beneath it; and then, without a word, he slid two fingers of his own along the sides of Calandola's wrist, and returned the pressure with one of his own that was just as powerful.

Calandola seemed not to react. It was as though he felt no pain; or else that he knew how, as Gilgamesh did, to treat pain as unworthy of his notice and dismiss it from awareness.

As they stood locked this way, hand in hand, fingers digging deep, Calandola said, "You are too big to be a Portugal and too dark to be an Angleez. But not dark enough, I think, for an African."

"No. I'm not any of those."

"Then what are you?"

Gilgamesh stepped up the pressure. Still Calandola showed no sign of discomfort. They were unable to hurt one another, it seemed.

"When I lived on the other shore," Gilgamesh said, "my land was known as the Land of the Two Rivers. Or we called it Sumer."

"In Africa?"

"Not in Africa, no." Now and then Gilgamesh had seen maps. He put little faith in them, but other men seemed to live by them; and on the maps, Africa was the name they gave that great hump-shouldered land far to the south of his own where the sky was like fire. "Some called my land Mesopotamia."

"I don't know that place."

"Very few do, in these times. But once it was the center of the world."

"No doubt it was," said Calandola, sounding unimpressed. He released Gilgamesh's hand, casually letting go, not in any admission of defeat but merely, it would seem, because whatever test he had imposed had brought him whatever answer he sought. "These Two Rivers of yours: which two were those?"

"The nearer was the Euphrates, as some call it. The other was the Tigris. We said the Buranunu, and the Idigna."

Calandola nodded remotely. Plainly those great names were nothing but noises to him. He seemed lost in private calculations.

"Bring wine," he called suddenly, gesturing to someone in the rear of the cavern.

Gilgamesh saw that a considerable entourage lurked in the darkness behind Calandola: half a dozen black men nearly as huge as their master and perhaps eleven women of the same sort, all of them clad in little more than beads and shells, and their dark skins glossy with oil. One came forward now with a wooden bowl full of some thick sweet-smelling wine. Calandola dipped his fingertips into it, and shook wine out over Gilgamesh's head as if anointing him, and then slowly rubbed the wine deep into his scalp, while murmuring in an unknown language. Gilgamesh submitted to the rite unprotestingly. Then the black giant offered

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the bowl to Gilgamesh. For an instant the Sumerian wondered if he was supposed to anoint Calandola in return; but no, apparently all he was meant to do was take a drink. He sipped, and found it heavy and almost nauseatingly sweet. Calandola watched him carefully. After a moment's hesitation Gilgamesh reached for the bowl again and took a second draught, draining deep.

Calandola threw back his head and laughed. His mouth was enormous, a great world-gulping hole set about with huge white teeth of formidable size. Four of the teeth were gone, two above and two below, so symmetrical in their absence that it seemed likely to Gilgamesh they had been removed deliberately, perhaps for beauty's sake, or in some witch-rite. And when Calandola's laughter set the men and women of his tribe laughing with him Gilgamesh saw that they too were missing two upper and two lower teeth, in the same pattern.

"You drink like a king," Calandola said. "Do you have a name?"

"I am Gilgamesh the Sumerian, who was king of Uruk."

"Ah. I am Calandola the Jaqqa, who was king of the world." He clapped his hands. "Oil for King Gilgamesh!" he roared.

Two of the black women came forward, struggling with a huge wooden tub that held some sort of dark grease. Dipping his immense hands in it, Calandola scooped up a great gobbet of the stuff and clapped it to Gilgamesh's bare chest; and then, with a surprisingly tender touch, he rubbed it in, chest and back and shoulders and the column of the neck, until the Sumerian gleamed as brightly as any of the Jaqqa folk. The same sharp and sour odor came from the oil that emanated from Calandola himself. Gilgamesh felt it permeating his skin, sinking in deep.

When he was done, Calandola held Gilgamesh a moment in a tight embrace. Gilgamesh sensed the bull-like force of the man, the mountainous mass of him.

Then Calandola let go of him and stepped back. "When you return, King Gilgamesh, perhaps we will seek the answers to these questions of yours."

Calandola flashed his eyes and grinned his gap-toothed grin; and then he turned in clear dismissal and stalked away into the shadows, and his entourage closed in behind him so that Gilgamesh no longer had sight of him.

For a long moment Gilgamesh stood staring, feeling the weight of the sweet wine within his gut and the slippery slickness of the grease with which Calandola had besmeared him. Then he looked about to see what had become of his companions. The Hairy Man leaned against the wall, arms folded across his deep shaggy chest, thin lips clamped in a look of glowering disapproval. As for Herod, he was kneeling in a sweaty heap, eyes fixed in the distance, arms hanging slackly. He looked dazed. It was

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something of the same look that he had had when he was staring out the window of Gilgamesh's room at the furious outpouring of flame from the erupting Vesuvius.

Gilgamesh poked him with his toe.

"Come," he said. "Get up. I think we have to go now."

Numbly Herod nodded. His eyes were wide. "He gave you the wine!" he murmured. "He gave you the oil! Extraordinary! Astonishing! On the first visit, the wine, the oil!"

"Is that so unusual?" Gilgamesh asked.

Herod was shivering with excitement. "The power of the man! The sheer awesomeness of him! I can't believe he gave you the wine the first time. And the oil. It was as though he looked at you and sized you up in a single glance, and said to himself, Yes, this man and I, we are of the same spirit. My God, how I envy you! To be taken right into Calandola's arms—" He swung around toward Gilgamesh and the Sumerian saw the look of sickening devotion on Herod's face.

In some strange way Gilgamesh felt undeniably impressed by Calandola himself. But not like this. Not like this.

From the shadowy corner the Hairy Man snorted contemptuously. "So much for half a million years of evolution. You lie down with savages and before long you turn into one yourself."

"And what are you?" Herod flared, whirling around in sudden fury. "You animal! You ape! You half-human thing! You wrap yourself in a toga and you think you're a Roman. But I know what you really are!"

"Come," Gilgamesh said.

"Before Adam ever was," Herod said fiercely to the Hairy Man, "you ran naked in the forests, and lived in holes in the ground, and knew no gods nor language nor civilization, and ate worms and grubs and leaves. Talk about savages! We know what your kind was. Savage is too polite a word. Let me tell you something: You people are just here on a technicality. Hell is for humans. If we have a few of you grunting ape-men here, too, well, that's just somebody twisting the rules a little. Maybe certain starry-eyed New Dead types have fooled themselves into thinking that you're our ancestors, but we both know that that can't be possible. And when you start putting on airs and pretending that you actually are human beings—"

"Enough of this, Herod," Gilgamesh said, more sternly. "Up. Out. Lead me back to the upper city." To the Hairy Man he said apologetically, "He's just overwrought. The air down here, I suppose—"

"He wants to sell his soul," said the Hairy Man. "The trouble is, he doesn't know where to find it. But I take no offense. I'm as accustomed to being called an ape as you are to explaining where your Land used to be. If he needs to think of himself as the crown of Creation, what's

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that to me? He knows nothing of the life we lived when the gods had not so much as imagined any of you." The Hairy Man laughed and scratched his furry chest. "Ask him, later, what that grease was that the black wizard rubbed into your skin. Not now. Ask him later."

7.

"—human fat?" Gilgamesh said, incredulous.

Herod moved his head in a quick affirmative. They were in Sulla's palace again, by the courtyard fountain.

"But where does he get it?"

"There are plenty of bodies available. Life isn't simply cheap in Hell, you know. It's free for the taking, and who's to say no?"

Gilgamesh knew that well enough. No gods governed this world and law and order, or the lack of it, was a matter of purely local whim. There were marauding armies everywhere, and freelance bandits, and swaggering bullies, and mere casual random killers; and death was a daily commonplace. But death here was only an irritating annoyance, a bothersome but brief interruption of the endless ongoingness of your stay in Hell. There were those who had died three times the same week and came bounding back from it each time, apparently unchanged. Somewhere behind the scenes they reconstructed your body from whatever bits and pieces could be found, and stuffed your soul back into it and turned you loose to live again. Not that he had experienced it himself: so far as he could recall he had died only once in all his thousands of years, and that at the expected time, when his span on Earth had come to its appointed end. But keeping himself from being killed in Hell was only a matter of pride for him. Enkidu had said that of him once, hurling the accusation at him in anger the one time they had quarreled: "Too *proud to die—too proud to accept the decree of the gods—*" And Gilgamesh had had to admit to himself that it was true. Because he had been who he had been, he took care to guard himself constantly against attack here, and when he was attacked he saw to it that his strength or his cunning always would prevail. He would have no man able to boast that he had slain the mighty Gilgamesh. Yet if by some mischance he did someday die again, he was aware that it would not be for long.

Still and all, to be slaughtering people or hauling in the corpses of those slain by others, and oiling one's skin with the grease of them—!

"Does it disgust you?" Herod asked.

Gilgamesh shook his head. "A little. I don't know. It seems displeasing. Who is this Calandola? He said he was a king in Africa. But that means little to me."

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"And to me. The Africa we Romans knew was a land of light-skinned folk, just across the water from Rome. He's from deeper down, the dark part of the continent. And of a much later time, they say. He lived by the river Zaire, in the land called Kongo, in the days when the Spaniards and the English and the Portuguese were building empires across the seas."

"Just the day before yesterday, that is to say."

"Yes. His people were known as Jaqqas. Nomads, they were. Warriors who would destroy everything that lay in their path, for the sheer love of destruction. There was something almost religious about it, their fondness for smashing things. Purifying the earth is what they called it."

"And when his army was finished purifying, he'd shine himself up with the fat of the conquered, is that it? A cheerful custom which he takes pleasure in continuing to practice in Hell?"

"Oh, he does worse things than that."

Gilgamesh raised an eyebrow. "Does he?"

"Far worse."

"Such as?"

"Don't ask me to tell you. You'll have to discover the rest for yourself. I'm pledged to reveal nothing. If I break my oath he'll know right away. And cast me out."

"Out of what?"

Herod seemed surprised. "His presence! His fellowship! His—his light!"

Light was an odd term to use, Gilgamesh thought, for one who reigned in darkness and who seemed himself to be the very embodiment of darkness. He stared at Herod in distaste. "You worship him, don't you?"

"That's a bit of an overstatement, I'd say."

"As you wish."

"I'd say that I'm fascinated by him, is all."

"Merely in the way of scholarship?"

"It's more than scholarly," Herod said. "I won't deny that I'm in awe of him. Fascinated to the point of awe, yes. Yes. But so are you. Admit it, Gilgamesh! I was watching you. He's practically as big as you are, and maybe just as strong as you are, and there's something about him, something mysterious and powerful, that draws you in, just as he's drawn in everyone else who ever came near him. Admit it! Admit it, Gilgamesh!"

Herod's high-pitched voice had taken on that buzzing intensity again, and for a moment Gilgamesh had to struggle to keep from swatting him. There were, Gilgamesh had heard, certain poor souls in Hell who had been given the forms of strange insects when they were reborn here, instead of bodies of their own. Well, Herod's body certainly seemed human enough, but it was as if there was something of the insect about him as well. A wasp, a fly, a gnat. He was certainly infuriating.

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And this fascination that Herod claimed to feel for Calandola. This awe. There was something sick about it, weak, submissive, ugly. Clearly the black man emanated some magical force that Herod had allowed completely to seize possession of him. Gilgamesh understood now why he had taken so quick a dislike to Herod. The man was looking for some power greater than himself to which he could surrender everything: his identity, his soul, his entire self. If not Sulla, then the volcano. If not the volcano, then Calandola. Gilgamesh had never been able to understand the value of surrender of any sort; and certainly he had never held much regard for those who went about searching for it.

"He may be able to see through the mists," Gilgamesh said, "and tell me where Enkidu has gone. That's where my interest in your Lord Calandola begins and ends."

"Not true! Not true! But you won't own up to it."

"You tax my patience, Herod."

"You don't find him—attractive?"

"Attractive? Not in the least. 'Repellent' is the word I'd use."

"I wish I could believe that."

"Do you tell me that I'm lying?" asked Gilgamesh ominously.

"I tell you that you may be hiding things even from yourself," said Herod. "Oh, perhaps not! Perhaps not!" he added quickly, as Gilgamesh glared.

"Oiled in the fat of the dead! I never heard of such a thing in any land, not even the most barbarous. It is a monstrous thing to do, Herod."

"All right, so he's a monster. But won't you at least agree that he's a glorious monster? Larger than life, a monster of monsters. Oh, how my grandfather Herod would have loved him! So big, so dark. Those diabolical eyes. The way his skin is all carved and covered with bumps and welts. And those four teeth knocked out to make him look prettier—and the way he shines in the darkness, that gleam that he has—"

That gleam, Gilgamesh thought somberly. Yes.

"A monster, no question of that. I'm not so sure about glorious. The Hairy Man speaks the truth: your Calandola's a savage."

"Of course he is," Herod said at once. "That's what's so wonderful about him! A marvelous overwhelming hideous ghastly frightful savage! But he's a seer, too. You mustn't overlook the reality of his powers. You'll find out. He can open the darkness for you. He'll do the rite of the Knowing with you. And whatever questions you have will be answered."

"Ah, and will they be?"

"Have no doubt of that, Gilgamesh. None at all. All that is secret will be laid bare."

Gilgamesh pondered that. Opening the darkness? The rite of the Knowing?A half-naked savage with a piece of copper thrust through his nose,

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laying bare all that is secret? Well, maybe. Maybe. The only thing that was certain in Hell was the absolute strangeness of it. What had been invisible on Earth, or nearly so, was made manifest here. On Earth one sometimes caught glimpses of demons out of the corner of one's eye; here they sat down and played at dice with you, or sprawled by the fireside in a tavern, singing curious songs. Witchcraft was everywhere. Gilgamesh had no reason to doubt this Calandola's powers of divination. And if covering one's skin with loathsome grease was the price of finding the path to Enkidu, well, that was not too high a price to pay. No price would be too high for that.

At the far side of the courtyard Sulla and his Hairy Man appeared. The dictator beckoned.

"Gilgamesh! Where have you been?"

The Sumerian answered only with a shrug.

"Will you be at the party tonight?" Sulla called.

"Party?"

"After the games! Women, Gilgamesh! Wine! Rivers of wine! Don't forget!"

"Yes," Gilgamesh said, without enthusiasm. "Of course." Rivers of wine? Wine meant nothing to him now. The image of the Jaqqa Imbe Calandola rose up in his mind, soaring like a colossus above him, and then he had a sudden startling view of himself swimming desperately against a terrible current, in a river not of wine but of blood.

8.

"Take," Calandola said. "Drink."

For a second time Gilgamesh, led by a tense and apprehensive Herod Agrippa, had gone down into the tunnels below Pompeii. For a second time they had penetrated the torchlit chamber that was the lair of Imbe Calandola and his Jaqqa minions. And for a second time the black wizard-king had offered Gilgamesh the sweet wine and had rubbed his body with the oil of dread origin.

Now some further, deeper rite was about to commence. The room was more crowded than it had been the other time. There seemed to be even more Jaqqas than before, a great shadowy crew of them, thirty or forty or even more, stalking like long-legged goblins through the dim smoky recesses of the cavern, performing tasks that not even Gilgamesh's keen vision could clearly perceive. But also there were eight or ten or a dozen other figures in white Pompeiian garb, men and women, kneeling in the center of the room like acolytes, like initiates. Some of them were masked with strips of black cloth and others had their faces bared. Like Herod

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they seemed uneasy: their pale faces were glistening with perspiration and their eyes flickered constantly from side to side. Often during the rite of the wine and the oil they stared at Gilgamesh with great intensity, and sometimes with a strange expression that might have been loathing and fear, or perhaps pity and sorrow: he could not tell. It might even have been envy. Envy? For what? He felt like one who was about to be sacrificed to an unknown god.

From the depths of the room came music. The Jaqqas were playing fifes that made an ear-piercing shrieking sound, and beating on drums fashioned from the scaly hides of demon-beasts, and also tapping their fingers against thin boards mounted on wooden stakes. Four of the women came dancing across the room in wild cavorting prancing leaps, their oiled breasts bobbling, their gap-toothed mouths wide open in frozen grimaces. Calandola himself, shining and immense, sat astride a small three-legged stool intricately carved with the faces of demons, and rocked back and forth, bellowing in pleasure.

Then he rose and signaled, and two of the Pompeiian acolytes sprang to their feet, a man and a woman. Out of the darkness of the cavern's strange-angled corners the man brought a crook-necked flask and the woman fetched a tasseled red pillow on which there rested a cup of strange design, wide and shallow.

The music rose to a feverish frantic pitch. To Gilgamesh all music was irritating noise, save only the delicate flute-music and the light and lively drumming of Sumer, which he had not had the joy of hearing in five thousand years. But this Jaqqa stuff was a noise beyond noise: it was a thunder that thrust itself inside you and occupied all the space that there was within you, so that it threatened to evict your own soul from its housing.

"This is the royal wine," said Calandola in a voice like the dark rumbling of a bear. "It will make the first Opening for you, the Opening that comes before the Knowing. Are you prepared, King Gilgamesh?"

"Give me your wine."

"First your dog, and then you."

"The dog?"

"First the dog," Calandola said again.

"Very well," said Gilgamesh. This was all madness to him; but he saw none of it as any more mad than any other part. The dog? Why not the dog? "If the dog is willing, give the dog the royal wine."

Calandola made a brusque signal with three fingers of his left hand. The woman holding the pillowed cup knelt; the man poured the royal wine from the crook-neck flask.

When the cup was full she turned toward Ajax. The dog uttered a

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growling sound, but not, so it seemed, in any angry way. He looked up at Gilgamesh and there was an unmistakable questioning in his eyes.

Gilgamesh shrugged. "You are to go first," he said. "That is what I have been told. Drink, Ajax. If you will."

The room grew hushed. The dog drank, lapping quickly at the bowl. Wagging his tail, making little snuffling sounds: the royal wine appeared to please him. Gilgamesh had never known a dog to drink wine. But Ajax was a dog of Hell; there was no reason why the dogs of Hell could not drink wine, or fly through the air, or do any number of other unnatural things. Hell was not a natural place.

At length Calandola signaled again, and the woman withdrew the cup from Ajax. The dog remained motionless. His eyes seemed strange: unmoving and, so it appeared, glowing.

Gilgamesh reached now for the cup.

"No," Calandola said. "Not yet. Your other dog first."

"I have but one dog."

"This one," said the Jaqqa, and pointed with his foot at Herod.

The Judaean prince looked astounded. He had been kneeling beside the other acolytes; now he rose, shaking his head in disbelief, tapping his breast as though to say, "Me? *Me?*" Calandola pointed a second time, making a contemptuous hooking gesture with his outstretched foot to draw Herod forward. Gilgamesh thought the little man would topple over before he had managed to take five steps. But somehow he stayed upright long enough to approach the cup-bearer. She proffered the pillow. He took the cup from it, resting it in both his hands and putting his face down and forward, practically into the cup. In long sighing gulps he drank it dry. Then he swayed and shook; the cup-bearer seized the cup before he could drop it; Herod backed away, wearing now the same glazed look in his eyes that the dog Ajax did, and took up his kneeling position once more.

This time Gilgamesh waited to see whether there were any more dogs in the room. But no: at last it was his turn to taste the royal wine.

The man with the crook-necked flask poured. The woman who held the pillow carried the cup to the Sumerian.

"Take," said Calandola. "Drink."

Gilgamesh lifted the bowl as Herod had done, in both his hands. It was cool and smooth, like fine ivory, but irregular of shape beneath. As he stared down into it he ran his fingers over its undersurface and came to realize what sort of thing it was that he held in his hands: beyond any question a human skullcap, with the parts below the eyesockets cut away. Very well, he thought. We drink here from a polished skullcap. Why not? He was beginning to understand Lord Calandola's style of doing things. A skullcap is well suited to be a cup. Why not? Why not?

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The wine was dark, not honey-colored like the other stuff, but tinged with red. He took a sip. There was an overpowering sweetness to it: a sweetness like that of the sweetest nectar, or perhaps even more intense. It lay strangely on his tongue, a heavy thick-textured wine. He swallowed it and took another, and suddenly he knew what it was that gave the wine its sweetness, and what tinged it with red. This royal wine of Imbe Calandola's was a wine made of blood. Knowing that, he thought his stomach might rebel at it, and hurl it back. But no. No, it slipped down smoothly enough. He had some more.

He drank until the cup was empty, and looked up, and smiled, and handed it back to its bearer.

And waited.

The Opening, this was. That comes before the Knowing.

Well? Why was nothing happening? Why had his eyes not gone glassy, as had the dog's, as had Herod's? Why was he not swaying? Why not dizzy? Was he immune to Calandola's monstrous wine? Was he so lost within the walls of his own self that there could be no Opening for him?

He looked toward Calandola. "There is no effect," he said. "Perhaps another draught of your wine, Lord Calandola—"

Calandola laughed—a strangely drawn-out laugh, that sounded thin and far away, and came cascading down over Gilgamesh like the tumbling of a waterfall. He made no other reply.

Then came a weird droning voice from somewhere to his left, saying, "Alas, alas, you fall in error, world-striding Gilgamesh! No further wine do you need! The walls are down! The Opening is at hand!"

"What? What?"

"See me revealed! My previous self is what you behold."

The Sumerian gasped. Ajax had disappeared; and in his place a bizarre creature fluttered midway between the floor and the level of Gilgamesh's shoulders. It was something like a wasp, but larger than any insect Gilgamesh had ever seen, and covered with a shining blue incrustation almost like some precious stone. From its rear jutted a cruel-looking green stinger; and its tiny face was the face of a human woman. It buzzed and beat its wings as it hovered beside him.

"You see?" the wasp-woman cried. "In the Opening, much is shown! In my last life I was this, who am come back into Hell now as Ajax the dog."

"Your—last life—"

"As insect, yes. Though even before that did I have human flesh, the same as you. Yet I gave myself up to sin, and down I was forced to slip. For my penance was I made insect and greatly did I suffer. But then in later times for loyal service was I granted dog. You see, it is down the ladder and then sometimes up again. I still aspire, beyond dog. I rise

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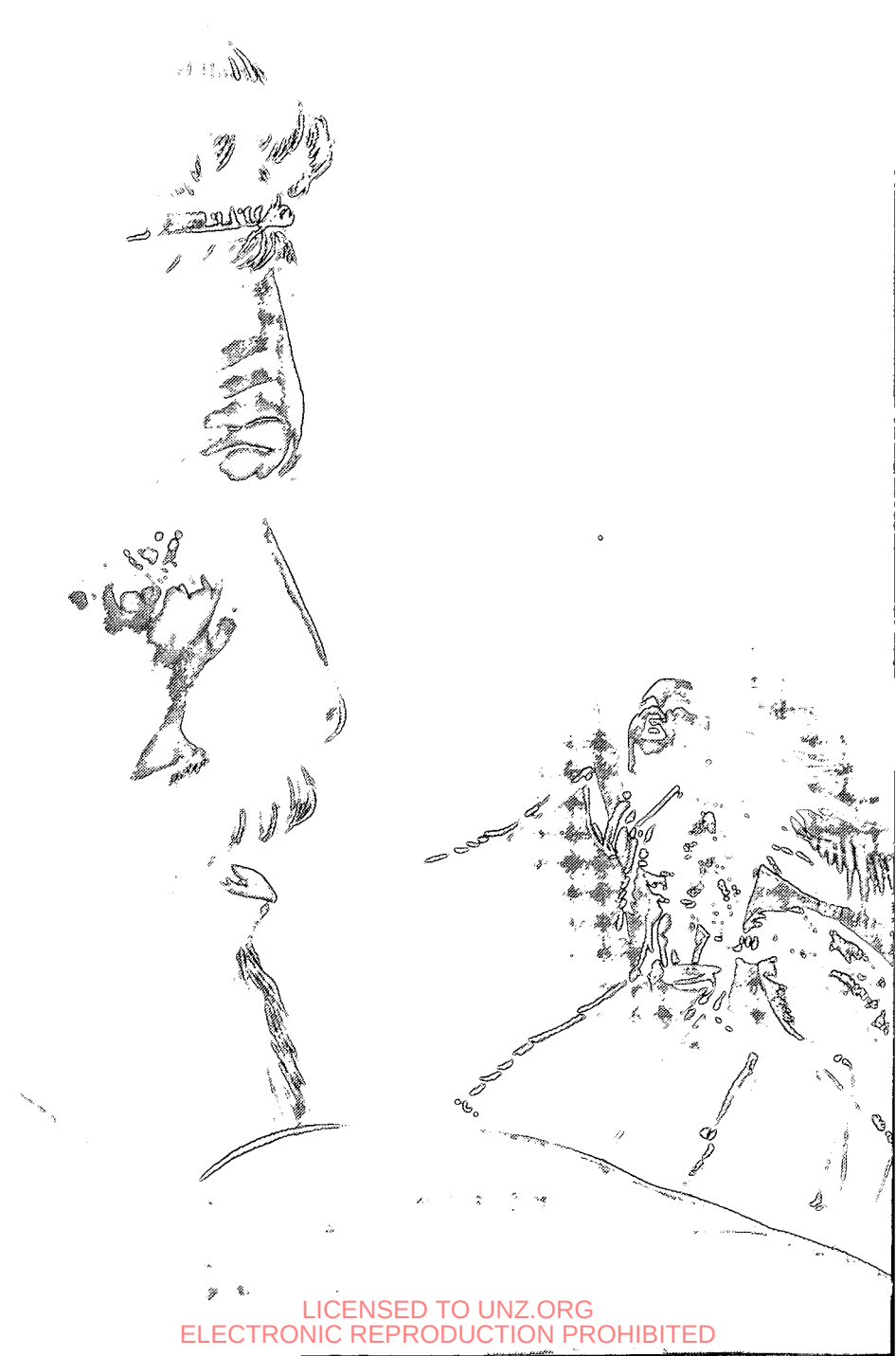

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again, and be better than dog. Though dog is good. When one has known insect, dog seems good."

Ah. That was it. Gilgamesh understood. His dog Ajax, then, was one of those unfortunates whose fate it was to drift from body to body, from form to form, during their eternal stay in Hell. So it seemed Calandola's wine was doing some work, if he was able to see such things as this. Yes, he was sure now: an Opening of some sort had been achieved, and he was perceiving things beyond the ordinary realm of perception.

"Indeed, dog is good," the wasp-woman was saying. "To have King Gilgamesh as my master is good. I follow the mighty Gilgamesh and he will take mercy on me some day and put me into a woman-body again. Or even a man-body. What does it matter, man or woman, if only human? Human I would be again, as who would not?"

Gilgamesh smiled. "If I can, I will," he said.

Instantly the wasp was a dog again; and Ajax lay flattened by his feet, nuzzling close.

Gilgamesh bent and stroked the beast fondly. Then he rose and turned toward Herod.

"And what of you?" asked Gilgamesh."You, wasp in human form, what shape do you present now?"

But no outward change had come over Herod under the influence of Calandola's drink. Herod was still Herod, a small bushy-haired quick-eyed man wearing a rumpled white toga, slumped in a kneeling position halfway across the chamber. Yet something was different now. The Herod whom Gilgamesh had come to know in these few days in Pompeii was a man of tricks and chatter, fast and flashy of mind, forever swiftly weaving a web of words about himself to keep bigger and more stupid foes at bay. It was a defense that must have served him well in his centuries in Hell; but now it seemed that the royal wine of the Jaqqa king had stripped all that away from him.

Herod was wide open, defenseless: a sad frightened dependent man who was spending the years of his death as he had spent the years of his life, searching for a master. Once it had been the Roman Emperor Caligula, who had turned him briefly into a king. Later—much later, here in Hell—it had been Sulla. Now it was this monstrous overbearing creature of darkness, Calandola. It could just as well be Gilgamesh next. Or Ché Guevara, or Mao Tse-tung, or Prester John, or any of the million million other emperors and princes and demigods and warlords who had set themselves up to rule some little corner of this vast and unknowable realm that was called Hell. Herod needed a master. He would probably be happier as a dog: if only he and Ajax could trade bodies somehow! Look at him, sitting there half slumped. Wishing he had a tail to wag,

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wishing he had soft brown worshipful eyes that he could turn lovingly upon his master, instead of those beady clever ones of his.

Gilgamesh felt a surge of scorn for Herod, that pitiful and most unkingly king.

But the scorn was short-lived. It melted at once and gave way to a deep sense of compassion that swept through Gilgamesh with unexpected force and left him shaken and weak. How could he feel kindness for the dog who had been a wasp and yearned to be a human again, and not for this human whose soul was the soul of a dog? To despise Herod because he was no hero was itself a despicable thing. There was no shortage of heroes in Hell. By the thousands and tens of thousands they swaggered about, replaying in death the dramas they had chosen in life. And if Herod—poor miserable little Herod—could manage nothing better than to find the joy of his life in the shattering outbursts of a volcano and in the barbaric blood-feasts of a nightmare savage, why, it was because he was who he was. He had no choice. No one had any choice. The gods decreed everything.

You, Gilgamesh: you will be a hero of heroes, a man like a god, a king among kings. And it will be your doom to die nevertheless, and to live forever in Hell.

You, Enkidu: you will be a bold hunter and warrior, friend to the great king. And it will be your doom to die again and again, while the king your friend seeks you through all the halls of eternity.

You, Herod: you will be clever and cautious, a mouse in a world of lions. And you will have wit enough to deceive them all and keep your throne and your life, no matter how terrifying the risks of power may be to you.

We are who we are, all of us. The gods determine. We play the parts assigned. Why, then, feel contempt for those who play parts unlike our own? Herod, Sulla, Calandola, the Hairy Man, the little scheming quarrelsome New Dead folk, and all the rest—each was playing his proper part, each was fulfilling the decree of the gods. And each was in his own way the hero of his own drama, doing as it seemed fit for him to do. How could anyone be condemned for that?

Gilgamesh went to Herod's side and bent down to take him by the arm.

"Up," he said gently. "No more crouching, here. You are a man. Stand up like a man."

"Gilgamesh—"

"There's nothing to fear. I am your friend. I will protect you against whatever it is that you fear."

But even as he spoke the words, Gilgamesh realized that the spell was breaking, became aware that the power of the wine was slipping away from him. The warmth and tenderness he felt for Herod fell away. The

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irritation and scorn returned. This sad weak man: why offer to protect him? What was Herod to him? Let him fend off his demons for himself. Let him grovel before Calandola. Let him dance on the rim of the crater of Vesuvius and throw himself into the volcano's boiling heart, if that was where he thought the true home of joy was to be found. Gilgamesh looked down at Herod and shook his head. Released his hold on Herod's arm. Turned away.

"Well, then, it seems to be over," said Calandola, his voice coming as though from a great distance.

Gilgamesh stood blinking and baffled like one who has stepped from midnight darkness into the full noonday blaze of the sun.

"That was it?" he asked. "The Opening?"

"When other souls stand bare before you, yes, that is the Opening, King Gilgamesh."

"And what now? Now the Knowing?"

"No," said Calandola. "Another time. You resisted the wine; you achieved only a partial Opening. Your soul is a stubborn one. It will not yield to forces from outside. Come back another time, King Gilgamesh: and then we will see if you are strong enough to accomplish the Knowing."

9.

"What did I do wrong?" Gilgamesh asked. "Where did I fail?"

"You held back," said Herod. "You were nearly there, and then at the last moment you held back. When the Opening begins, it's necessary to surrender completely to it. You were fighting it."

"Fighting is in my nature. Surrender isn't."

"Do you want the Knowing or don't you?"

"I thought I was yielding to the wine," Gilgamesh said. "I entered the soul of the dog. I saw what he had been in his last life. A wasp-creature, do you know that? With a woman's face and the body of some hideous insect. And then I turned to you—I saw your soul, Herod, I saw the true self within you, I—"

"All right. I don't need to hear about it."

"I saw nothing that would shame you."

"Thanks all the same, but I'd rather not know."

"It was as if the walls that separate us from each other had broken down. And then—then they were up again. The wine had worn off. Maybe if I had taken more—"

"Maybe," Herod said. "You're so damned big. Maybe Calandola misjudged the quantity. But he's been doing this for centuries. He knows

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what quantity is right. I think it's you, Gilgamesh. You held back, you kept some part of yourself in reserve. I can understand that. But if you want to learn the answers to your questions—if you hope to discover where Enkidu has gone—"

"Yes. I know."

"Calandola may not allow you to return to him for a week, or even a month. But when he summons you, go. And whatever he asks of you, do it. Or there'll be no Knowing for you. Eh, Gilgamesh?"

"What are you two chattering about?" Sulla asked, appearing suddenly beside them. "Hatching a good conspiracy?" The dictator, grinning, clapped one hand to Gilgamesh's broad back and one to Herod's. "It's useless, you know. I have seers who tell me everything. Past, present, and future lie revealed to them. The slightest hint of subversion here will show up instantly as a blip on their screens."

"No need to fear," Gilgamesh said. "I think Herod prefers being prime minister here to any higher responsibility. And surely you know that to rule in Pompeii is not a thing that I desire either, Sulla."

"I know what you desire, Gilgamesh. Come to me this time two days hence, and we'll study the map of Uruk together. We should be thinking of setting forth soon. What do you say, Gilgamesh? King of Uruk that was, king of Uruk that will be! How does that sound to you?"

"Like music," said Gilgamesh.

Sulla laughed and moved on.

Herod, looking troubled, said when the dictator was out of sight, "Is that true? You do want to be king of Uruk again after all?"

"I said Sulla's words were like music to me."

"So you did."

Gilgamesh chuckled. "But I am no lover of music."

"Ah. Ah."

"And as for the journey to Uruk—well, let's see what wisdom your great Calandola can offer me, first. When we do the true Opening. And the Knowing that follows it. And then I'll comprehend whether I am to make this journey or not. Let's wait and see, King Herod. Let's wait and see."

10.

The room of angles in the cavern of the tunnels. The smouldering torches in the brazen sconces. The drums, the fifes, the masks, the dancers. The long-legged black men pursuing unknown rituals in the shadows. The honeyed wine, the shining oil. This was Gilgamesh's third visit to the dwelling-place of Imbe Calandola. Once more now he would un-

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dertake to make the Opening; once more he would drink of the second and stronger wine, the thick sweet red beverage. Once more he would see beyond the barriers that divide soul from soul; and this time, perhaps, all the veils of mystery would be stripped away and he would be allowed to know the things he had come here to learn.

"I think you are ready," Calandola said. "For the deeper feast. For the full Knowing."

"Bring me the wine, yes," said Gilgamesh.

"It will not only be wine today," replied Calandola.

In the darkness, chanting and drums. Fires flickering behind the Imbe-Jaqqa's throne. Figures moving about. A sound that might have been that of water boiling in a great kettle.

A signal from Calandola.

The bearer of the wine came forth, and the bearer of the cup. Ajax once again drank first, and then Herod, and then Gilgamesh. But this time Calandola drank also, and drank deep, again and again calling for the cup to be filled, until his lips and jowls were smeared with red.

"Belial and Beelzebub," Herod whispered. "Moloch and Lucifer!"

Gilgamesh felt the strangeness of the Opening settling upon him once more. He could recognize its signs now: an eerie hush, a heightened awareness. Invisible beings brushed past him in the air. There was a deep humming sound that seemed to come from the core of the world. He could touch the souls of Ajax the dog and Herod the Jew; and now there was the formidable presence of black Calandola also revealed to him. Revealed and not revealed, for although Gilgamesh saw the inwardness of Calandola it was like a huge black wall of rock rising before him, impenetrable, unscalable.

"Now will you join our feast," said Calandola. "And the Knowing will descend upon you, King Gilgamesh."

He threw back his head and laughed, and made a gesture with his massive arms like the toppling of two mighty trees. From the musicians came a crashing of sounds, a terrible thunder, and a screeching. The throne was drawn aside; and a great metal cauldron stood revealed, bubbling over a raging fire of logs.

Calandola's minions were preparing a rich and robust stew.

Into the cauldron went onions and leeks and peppers, beans and squash, pomegranates and grapes, vegetables and fruits of every sort imaginable. The steaming vessel seemed bottomless. Ears of corn and sacks of figs, huge gnarled tuberous roots of this kind and that, most of them unknown to Gilgamesh. Clusters of garlic, double handfuls of radishes, slabs of whole ginger. A barrel of dark wine, of what sort Gilgamesh dared not think. Spices of fifty kinds. And meat. Massive chunks of pale raw meat, flung in whole, still on the bone.

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A troublesome feeling stirred in Gilgamesh. To Herod he said, "What meat is that, do you think?"

Herod was gazing at the cauldron with unblinking eyes. He laughed in an oddly nervous way and said, "One that is not kosher, I would suspect."

"Kosher? What is that?"

But Herod made no answer. A shiver ran through him that made his whole body ripple like a slender tree beset by the wild autumn gales. His face was aglow with the brightness that Gilgamesh had seen in it that time when the volcanao had erupted. Herod had the look of one who was held tight in the grip of some powerful enchantment.

By the virtue of the dark wine they had shared, Gilgamesh looked into Herod's soul. What he saw there made him recoil in amazement and shock.

"*That* meat?"

"They say there is no better one for this purpose, King Gilgamesh."

His stomach twisted and turned.

He had eaten many strange things in many strange lands. But never this. To devour the flesh of his own kind—

No. No. No. No. Not even in Hell.

Gilgamesh had heard tales, now and then, of certain races in remote parts of the world that did such things. Not for nourishment's sake but for magic. To take into themselves the strength or the wisdom or the mystical virtue of others. It had been hard for him to believe that such things were done.

But to be asked to do it himself—

"Unthinkable. Forbidden. Abominable."

"Forbidden by whom?" asked Herod.

"Why—by—"

Gilgamesh faltered and could say no more.

"We are in Hell, King Gilgamesh. Nothing is forbidden here. Have you forgotten that?"

Gilgamesh stared. "And you truly mean to commit this abomination? You want me to commit it with you?"

"I want nothing from you," Herod said. "But you are here in search of knowledge."

"Which is obtained like *this?*"

Herod smiled. "So it is said. It is the gateway, the way of the full Opening that leads to the Knowing."

"And you believe this insanity?"

The Judaean prince turned to face him, and there was a look of terrible conviction in his eyes.

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"Do as you please, King Gilgamesh. But if you would have the knowledge, take and eat. Take and eat."

"Take and eat!" came the booming voice of Calandola. "Take and eat!"

The cannibal tribesmen leaped and danced. One who was whitened with chalk from head to toe and wore straw garments that seemed to be the costume of a witch rushed to the cauldron, pulled a joint of meat from the boiling water with his bare hands, held it aloft.

"Ayayya! Ayayya!" the Jaqqas cried. "Ayayya!"

The witch brought the meat to Calandola and held it forth to him for his inspection. From Calandola came a roar of approval; and he seized the joint with both his hands, and put his jaws to it and buried his teeth in it.

"Ayayya! Ayayya!" cried the Jaqqas.

Gilgamesh felt the wine of the cannibals flowing through his soul. He swayed in rhythm to the harsh and savage music. Beside him, Herod now seemed wholly transported, lost in an ecstasy, caught up entirely in the fascination of this abomination. As though he had waited all his life and through his life after life as well to make this surrender to Calandola's foul mystery. Or as though he had no choice but to be swept along into it, wherever it might take him.

And I feel myself swept along also, thought Gilgamesh in shock and amazement.

"Take," said Calandola. "Eat."

Joyously he held the great slab of steaming meat out toward Gilgamesh.

Gods! Enlil and Enki and Sky-father An, what is this I am doing?

The gods were very far from this place, though. Gilgamesh stared at the slab of meat.

"This is the way of Knowing," said Calandola.

This?

No. No. No. No.

He shook his head. "There are some things I will not do, even to have the Knowing."

The aroma from the kettle mixed with some strange incense burning in great braziers alongside it, and he felt himself swaying in mounting dizziness. Turning, he took three clumsy, shambling steps toward the entrance. Acolytes and initiates drew back, making way for him as he lumbered past. He heard Calandola's rolling, resonant laughter behind him, mocking him for his cowardice.

Then Herod was in his path, blocking him. The little man was drawn tight as a bow: trembling, quivering.

Huskily he said, "Don't go, Gilgamesh."

"This is no place for me."

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"The Knowing—what about the Knowing—"

"No."

"If you try to leave, you'll never find your way out of the tunnels without me."

"I'll take my chances."

"Please," said Herod. "*Please*. Stay. Wait. Take the Sacrament with me."

"The Sacrament? You call this a Sacrament?"

"It is the way of the Knowing. Take it with me. For me. Don't spurn it. Don't spurn me. We are already halfway there, Gilgamesh: the wine is in our souls, our spirits are opening to each other. Now comes the Knowing. Please. Please."

He had never seen such an imploring look on another human being's face. Not even in battle, when he raised his axe above a foe to deliver the fatal stroke. Herod reached his hands toward Gilgamesh. The Sumerian hesitated.

"And I ask you too," came a voice from his left. "Not to take depart. Not to abandon loyal friends."

Ajax.

The dog was flickering like the shadows cast by a fire on a wall: now the great brindle hound, now the strange little wasp-woman, and now, for only a moment, a hint of a human shape, a sad-eyed woman smiling timidly, forlornly.

"If you take the meat you can set me free," said the dog. "Reach into soul, separate dog and spirit. You would have the power. Send poor suffering soul on to next sphere, leave dog behind to be dog. I beg you, mighty king."

Gilgamesh stared, wavering. The dog's pleas moved him deeply.

"Your friends, great hero. Forget not your friends in this time of savioring. Long enslavement must end! You alone can give freedom!"

"Is this true?" Gilgamesh asked Herod.

"It could be. The rite releases much power to those who have power within them."

"Forget not your friends," the wasp-woman cried again.

For a moment Gilgamesh closed his eyes, trying to shut out all the frenzied madness about him. And a voice within him said, *Do it. Do it.*

Why not? Why not? Why not?

This is Hell, nor is there any leaving of it.

He crossed the room to Calandola, who still held the meat. The cannibal chieftain grinned ferociously at Gilgamesh, who met his fiery gaze calmly and took the meat from him. Held it a moment. It was warm and tender, a fine cut, a succulent piece. Out of the buried places of his mind came words he had been taught five thousand years before, that time in his

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youth when he was newly a king and he had knelt before the priests in Uruk on the night of the rite of the Sacred Marriage:

What seems good to oneself
is a crime before the god.
What to one's heart seems evil
is good before one's god.
Who can comprehend the minds of gods
in heaven's depths?

"Take," Herod whispered. "Eat!"

Yes, Gilgamesh thought. This is the way. He lifted the slab of meat to his lips.

"Ayayya! Ayayya! Ayayya!"

He bit down deep, and savored, and swallowed; and from the volcano Vesuvius somewhere not far away there came a tremendous roar, and the earth shook; and as he tasted the forbidden flesh the Knowing entered into him in that moment.

It was like becoming a god. All things lay open to him, or so it seemed. Nothing was hidden. His soul soared; he looked down on all of space and time.

"Your friends, Gilgamesh," came a whispering voice from high overhead. "Do not forget—your friends—"

No. He would not forget.

He sent forth his soul into the dog that was the wasp-woman that once had been a human sinner. Without difficulty he distinguished the human soul from the dog-soul and the wasp-soul; and separated the one from the others, and held it a moment, and released it like a bird that one holds in one's hand and casts into the sky. There was a long sigh of gratitude; and then the wandering soul was gone, and Ajax the dog lay curled sleeping at Gilgamesh's feet, and of the wasp-creature there was no sign.

To Herod then he turned. Saw the sadness within the man, the weakness, the hunger. Saw too the quick agile mind, the warm spirit eager to please. And Gilgamesh touched Herod within, only for an instant, letting something of himself travel across the short distance from soul to soul. A touch of strength; a touch of resilience. *Here,* he thought. *Take this from me; and hold something of myself within you, for those times when being yourself is not enough for you.*

Herod seemed to glow. He smiled, he wept, he bowed his head. And knelt and offered a blessing of thanks.

Gilgamesh could feel the presence of monstrous Calandola looming over him like a titan. Like a god. And yet he seemed no longer malevolent.

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Distant, dispassionate, aloof: serving only as a focus for this strange rite of the joining of souls.

"Seek your own Knowing now, Gilgamesh," said the Jaqqa. "The time has come."

Yes. Yes. The time has come. Now—Enkidu—?

Where?

Ah: there. There he was, among that contentious pack of fools with whom they had been traveling when they first came into this region of Hell. With an effort Gilgamesh brought their names to mind. There was red-haired Achilles darting here and there, and the woman, the beautiful sorceress, she was called Tanya Burke, and the black-clad man with the gun was Nichols, and the other one, Welch, whose hair was cut as short as stubble. New Dead, all of them except Achilles, who might as well have been one of them himself, since he had adopted all their ways, the guns and the helicopters and the cheap coarse language and the cheap coarse way of thinking that those modern people had. Why was Enkidu with them? Why, because he was their prisoner. Yes. Nichols' gun was trained on Enkidu's chest. They were in a gulley somewhere on the mainland, a steep ravine, and the helicopter was damaged, it must have landed badly, it was tipped up on one side and smoke was coming from it. Enkidu? Enkidu? Gilgamesh felt tears crowding into his eyes at the sight of his friend, his brother, held captive by these tawdry people. Enkidu was squatting down, studying them, seemingly held in spell by that golden-haired woman's beauty. Gilgamesh knew how a woman could bind Enkidu that way. But also he knew that squatting posture of Enkidu's, knew that it was his way of gathering strength and force, that he was waiting, tightening himself like a coiling spring—

Rising suddenly—lunging, darting for freedom—

"Enkidu! No!" Gilgamesh cried.

But it was like crying out within a dream. He could do nothing. He was not a god; and this vision, he knew, was sealed already into the irremediable past. Enkidu, rushing toward the edge of the ravine—Nichols raising the gun, aiming, and firing almost in the same instant—Enkidu lurching, staggering, falling—

Falling—

Then there was only nothingness where Enkidu had been. His spirit had been swept away to that mysterious place of reassignment. Where he would wait in limbo until it was his turn to be given flesh and breath again, and be sent forth into the death-in-life of Hell.

"Where will I find him?" Gilgamesh asked.

And a voice replied, "You must seek him in Uruk of the treasures."

Fiercely Gilgamesh shook his head. "There is no Uruk!"

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"No? No? Are you sure, King Gilgamesh? Is that what the Knowing tells you?"

"Why—"

He looked. And saw. And the veils of memory dropped away.

Uruk!

It lay glittering upon the breast of a broad dark plain, a white city bright as a jewel. There was the platform of the temples, there were the sacred buildings, there were the ceremonial streets. Uruk. Not the Uruk where he had been born and been king and died, but that other Uruk, New Uruk, the Uruk of Hell, that great Uruk which he—

—had founded—

—had ruled for a hundred years, or was it a thousand—

—he—he—a king in Hell—

The Knowing came upon him like a torrent. Why had he thought he was an exception to the rule that the heroes in Hell must recapitulate the struggles of their lifetimes? How had he deceived himself into thinking that he and Enkidu had spent all their thousands of years in Hell merely wandering, and hunting, and wandering again, shunning the ambitions that raged like fire in the rest? Of course he had sought to reign in Hell. Of course he had brought followers together here once upon a time, and built a city, and made it magnificent, and defended it against all attack. How could he not have done such a thing? For was he not Gilgamesh the king?

And then—then—

Then to forget—

He understood now. Memory was tricky in Hell. Whole centuries might collapse into a single moment, and be forgotten. Whole empires might rise and fall and go unremembered. There was no history here. There was really no past, only a stew of events that did not form a pattern; and there was no future, and scarcely any present, either.

In Hell everything is flux and change, though beneath the flux nothing ever changes. He had truly thought the lust for power had been burned out of him by time. Perhaps it had. But there was no longer any denying the things he had so long been able to hide even from himself. He knew now why all those little men engaged in conspiracies and revolutions and the other trips of power here in Hell. Without striving, what is there to keep one from going mad in this eternity? He had put striving behind him, or so he thought. Perhaps. Perhaps. But perhaps he was not entirely done with it yet.

He stood stunned and gaping in the midst of Calandola's terrible feast. Within him blazed the forbidden food that had opened his eyes.

Enkidu dead. Uruk real. Himself not yet entirely immune to the craving for power.

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Now I have had the Knowing, Gilgamesh thought.

Enkidu is gone from me once more. And I have been a king in Hell. And he dropped to his knees and covered his face with his hands and let great sobs of mourning rip through his body. But whether it was for Enkidu that he mourned, or for himself, he could not say.

11.

"So soon?" Sulla asked. "What's your hurry? We need time to plan things properly."

"I mean to set out for Uruk in five days or less," said Gilgamesh. "You may come with me or not, as you please. I have my bow. I have my dog. I am well accustomed to traveling by myself through the wilderness."

Sulla looked mystified. "Just a day or two ago I had my doubts that you wanted to go to Uruk at all. You didn't even seem to believe the place was there. And now—now you can't wait to get started. What happened that turned you around so fast?"

"Does it matter?" Gilgamesh asked.

"It's your friend Enkidu, isn't it? Some wizard here has told you that he's waiting for you in Uruk. Am I right?"

"Enkidu is dead," said Gilgamesh.

"But he'll be reassigned to Uruk. By the time you get there, he'll be waiting. Right?"

"It could be."

"Then there's no hurry. He'll be there when you get there. Whenever that is. Relax, Gilgamesh. Let's organize this thing the right way. Picked men, decent equipment, give the Land Rovers a good tuneup—"

"You do those things. I don't plan to wait around."

Sulla sighed. "Rush, hurry, go off half-cocked, never stop to think anything through! It's not my style. I didn't think it was yours. I thought you were different from all the other dumb heroes."

"So did I," said Gilgamesh.

"Ten days?" Sulla said.

"Five."

"Be merciful, Gilgamesh. Eight days is the soonest. I have responsibilities here. I have to draw up a schedule for my viceroy. And there are decrees to sign, material to requisition—"

"Eight days, then," said Gilgamesh. "Not nine."

"Eight days," said Sulla.

Gilgamesh nodded and went out. Herod was waiting in the hall, cowering by the door, probably eavesdropping. Almost certainly eavesdropping. He looked up, his eyes not quite meeting those of Gilgamesh. Since

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the last visit to the cavern of Calandola Herod had been remote, furtive, withdrawn, as though unable to face the recollection of the terrible rite he had led Gilgamesh into.

"You heard?" Gilgamesh asked.

"Heard what?"

"We leave for Uruk, Sulla and I. In eight days."

"Yes," Herod said. "I know."

"You'll be the viceroy, I think. I'm sorry about that."

"Don't be."

"You didn't want this to happen."

"I didn't want to be viceroy, no. But I won't be. So there's no problem."

"If you aren't going to be viceroy, who will be?"

Herod shrugged. "I don't have any idea. Calandola, for all I care." He reached out uncertainly toward Gilgamesh, not quite touching his arm. "Take me with you," he said suddenly.

"What?"

"To Uruk. I can't stay here any longer. I'll go with you. Anywhere."

"Are you serious?"

"As serious as I've ever been."

Gilgamesh gave the little man a close, long look. Yes, he did indeed seem to mean it. Leave the comforts and tame terrors of Pompeii, take his chances roaming in the hinterlands of Hell? Yes. Yes, that was what he appeared to want. Maybe the experience in the cavern beneath the city had transformed Herod. It was hard to imagine going through something like that and not coming out transformed. Or perhaps it was simply that sad little Herod had formed one more attachment that he felt unable to break.

"Take me with you," said Herod again.

"The journey will be a harsh one. You've grown accustomed to ease here, Herod."

"I can grow unaccustomed to it. Let me come with you."

"I don't think so."

"You need me, Gilgamesh."

It was all Gilgamesh could do to keep from laughing at that.

"I do?"

"You'll be a king again when you reach Uruk, won't you? Won't you? Yes. You can't hide that from me, Gilgamesh. I was there when you had the Knowing. I had the Knowing, too."

"And if I am?"

"You'll need a fool," Herod said. "Every king needs a fool. Even I had one, when I was a king. But I think somehow I'd do the other job better. Take me along. I don't want to stay in Pompeii. I don't want to visit

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Calandola's cavern again. I might want another dinner there. Or I might *become* dinner there. Will you take me along with you, Gilgamesh?"

Gilgamesh hesitated, frowned, said nothing.

"Why not?" Herod demanded. "Why not?"

"Yes," Gilgamesh said. "Why not?" His own favorite phrase floating back at him. The great unending *Why Not?* that was Hell.

"Well?" asked Herod.

"Yes," said Gilgamesh again. There was some charm in the idea, he thought. Herod was intelligent, and shrewd besides: a good combination, not overly common. He could be a lively companion, when he wasn't buzzing and chattering. A better companion, very likely, than old wine-guzzling Sulla. And possibly Herod wouldn't buzz and chatter quite so much, while they were on the march, out among the rigors of the back country. It might almost make sense. Yes. Yes. Gilgamesh nodded. He smiled. Yes. "Why not, Herod? Why not?" ●

THE CHRONONAUT VISITS THE FAMOUS PAIR DURING THEIR FIRST EXPERIMENT

Down near the train yards that smelled like the damp underbelly of Chicago, they built the Ether cabinet. When they powered up, blue lightning eeled across the glass as Morley lay wide-eyed inside. "Nothing," Michelson said. "Nothing conclusive." "But I could feel the blue light fall rapidly through me," Morley said with a gesture of dismay. Michelson scratched at his stubble and tapped at the controls. "I wonder how fast it fell..."

—Robert Frazier

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ON BOOKS by Norman Spinrad

THE EDGE OF THE ENVELOPE

If "sci-fi"—commercial action-adventure formula plotting, conventionalized image systems, simplistic moral dualism, transparent self-effacing prose, mandatory happy endings, the whole pulp tradition baggage—easily enough characterizes the prevalent literary vices of the SF genre, then what are the characteristic literary *virtues* of science fiction?

There is plenty of evidence, after all, that it must have them.

SF and detective fiction are, after all, just about the only survivors of the pre-World War II commercial pulp genres, and science fiction quite dominates American short fiction period, certainly in terms of the number of stories published annually, and arguably in terms of literary vitality as well.

And while half the membership of the SFWA may be writing the stuff to achieve fannish glory in the process of separating Joe from his beer money, many of their acknowledged colleagues openly admit to higher literary, political, or philosophical motivations, and sometimes all three.

Some, like Philip K. Dick, Brian W. Aldiss, Michael Moorcock, Michael Bishop, Thomas M. Disch, Robert A. Heinlein, John Brunner, Jerry Pournelle, John Shirley, Lucius Shepard, Kim Stanley Robinson, and Samuel R. Delany have customarily been published in SF lines and are generally accepted as members of the tribe. Others, like Le Guin and Vonnegut, started out that way but are now self-proclaimed apostates. Ray Bradbury, and perhaps Bradbury alone, has achieved establishment literary acclaim without divorcing himself publically from his roots.

Lisa Goldstein, who started out working in an SF specialty bookstore, about as deep inside the SF community as you can get, won the American Book award for *The Red Magician*, a novel published by Timescape, and for best paperback book period, not for genre fiction.

A. A. Attanasio has been publishing science fiction for years in the usual places but pretty much in isolation from the influences of the genre apparatus. James Morrow has begun a promising career with three unabashed science fiction novels, none of which have been published in a regular SF line.

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What all these writers and many more have in common is that they are science fiction writers by any remotely meaningful definition of the term, but they are not at all attracted to the conventions of "sci-fi." They have chosen to write science fiction for their own diverse literary reasons, for its own inherent literary virtues.

Then, too, there are presently more people than one might first think who have written science fiction of one kind or another in isolation from the whole genre apparatus. People who do not consider themselves "science fiction writers," who turn up their noses in disdain at "sci-fi," who sometimes go to rather ludicrous extent to distance themselves from the "SF community" and all that it implies, so-called mainstream writers who nevertheless are attracted to the writing of science fiction.

The roster of established literary lions who have essayed at least some science fiction or borderline fantasy since World War II is, upon reflection, quite formidable. Aldous Huxley, Vladimir Nabokov, George Orwell, William Burroughs, Gore Vidal, Thomas Pynchon, Anthony Burgess, Doris Lessing, Paddy Chayefsky, Kingsley Amis, Margaret Atwood, Dom Delillo, Russell Hoban, William Golding, Lawrence Durrell for a few quick examples.

Some, like Nabokov (*Ada*), Durrell (*Tunc*) and Chayefsky (*Altered States*), have dabbled only once or twice. Others, like Vidal (*Messiah, Myra Breckenridge, Kalki*) and Burgess (*A Clockwork Orange, The Wanting Seed, End of the World News*), seem to turn out a piece of science fiction every now and again as part of their general repertoire. A few, like Orwell (*1984, Animal Farm*), and Huxley (*Brave New World, Island*), are best known for their SF, even though it doesn't really dominate their oeuvre in terms of total wordage published.

Burroughs, Pynchon, and in a weird way Golding (arguably the first science fiction writer to win a Nobel Prize for literature), have really written little of significance that is *not* science fiction of a kind, and would be readily enough accepted as science fiction writers had they proclaimed themselves such, pinned on pro badges, and started attending science fiction conventions.

Indeed, Doris Lessing, Guest of Honor at the Brighton Worldcon, who became a science fiction writer in mid-career and now writes almost nothing else, appears to have done just that.

The point of all this being that there is a lot more to science fiction than sci-fi. There are many people writing science fiction which ignores or even knowingly defies the conventions and expectations of the sci-fi pulp tradition. There is by now a large body of science fiction which is as connected (or as disconnected) to general literary tradition as it is to the SF genre.

The attitude of these writers towards "SF" is as various as their

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work. Some, like Le Guin and Vonnegut, are concerned with shaking off their genre identification. Others, like Dick, Bradbury, Bishop, Delany, and Disch, have accepted their positions in the SF pantheon. William Burroughs has gone so far as to incorporate authorized variations on stories by Alan Nourse and Henry Kuttner into his own work. Doris Lessing is guest of honor at a Worldcon. Pynchon, Vidal, and others take no public positions, and write as if no SF existed but their own. Atwood and Burgess have made disparaging statements about science fiction. So it goes.

In part all this ambivalence and confusion is the result of ignorance. Some of the "mainstream" writers are not very well read in the field and seem to feel they have reinvented it.

Some of it is career strategy. Some of the "science fiction writers" are trying to "break out" in terms of packaging, distribution, and critical attention, and tailor their public stances towards that end. Some have already succeeded. Some of the newer writers are attempting to avoid genre identification in the first place.

But all of these writers, whatever their stances, have two things in common.

They write science fiction.

They do not write sci-fi.

But why?

Why do writers like Bishop, Disch, and Delany continue to write science fiction when they have the tools to "go mainstream"? Why did a novelist as great as Philip K. Dick remain loyal to science fiction? Why do "mainstream" writers like Burgess and Atwood turn to the writing of science fiction even as they badmouth the established practitioners thereof? Why does a literary genius like Burroughs openly borrow material from Kuttner and Nourse? Why does a Doris Lessing shift careers in midstream?

Surely not because they are all enamored of the pulp action adventure tradition or long to have their books published with rocketships on the cover or feel that SF is the royal road to fame, fortune, and literary recognition, or view the Hugo and the Nebula as their ultima thules.

There must be literary reasons. And to know what they are is to understand the central virtues of science fiction as a literary mode and vice versa.

Writers who wish to speculate on modes of human consciousness, or species of social or political or cultural organization that have no existence in either the past or present have only three literary alternatives—straightforward fantasy, in which anything goes a priori; science fiction, which is generally constrained by what we presently regard as the basic physical laws of existence; and that strange hybrid of science fiction and fantasy, the alternate world story, in which one aspect of history or the environment is arbitrarily altered and

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the consequences worked out with science fiction's characteristic extrapolative rigor.

All of which are eminently embraceable by the SF logo as far as publishers of regular SF lines are concerned. All of which have have also been utilized by writers working far outside the SF apparatus.

Fantasy, of course, is the ur-literature of the species, since it is only rather recently in our history that we have conceived the notion that we know what is real and what is not, and in this sense just about everything written before say the Age of Reason partakes of the essential weltanschauung of fantasy, namely that reality is subject to capricious mutation, and anything at all may lie beyond the next hill.

Science fiction evolved, along with the Age of Reason, the rise of the scientific worldview, and the Industrial Revolution, as a dialectical response to fantasy. During this period, the blank spaces on the map of the planet Earth were filled in, the exfoliating human technosphere began to divorce itself from the "natural" realm, and scientific explication of the previously mysterious pushed back the sphere of the supernatural as it delineated the physical parameters of our universe.

Fantasy requires an element of the supernatural, a transcendence of the reader's quotidian reality, a mythic dimension. From time immemorial it had addressed an audience for whom the supernatural was a pervasive reality, but now that science had severely circumscribed the realm of the supernatural, it began to more and more require the readership's collaboration, a willing suspension of disbelief.

If, as Brian Aldiss contends, *Frankenstein* was the first true science fiction novel, it is also, appropriately enough, centrally concerned with the very dialectic that gave the mode birth. Whereas fantasists of previous eras could have conjured the monster as a golem with an incantation or two and gone on to tell the same tale, Mary Shelley makes her wizard a scientist and concocts a scientific rationale for the human creation of artificial life.

And if she invented science fiction, she invented something far more central than the mad scientist and the android. She shifted the responsibility for suspension of disbelief away from the reader and onto the writer.

She rationalized her mythic tale of wonder with the scientific worldview of her day; in terms of literary technique, however questionable the scientific speculation might have been even then, she used a scientific rationale to persuade the reader that her story took place in the realm of the possible.

And that is as good a working definition of science fiction as any. In a weird kind of way, science fiction is a literary technique for recreating the lost innocence of fantasy, for resurrecting the

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reader's true belief in the tale of wonder, in the possibility of the fantastic, in the notion that his universe and the universe of the marvelous may be one and the same. Through science fiction, via science and technology and not despite it, magic of a kind re-entered the mechanistic Victorian world, a magic which did *not* require the reader's willing suspension of disbelief.

If *Frankenstein* was the first true science fiction novel, Mark Twain's *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* created the alternate world form, and may have been the first time-travel story to boot. Twain gets his Yankee back to Arthurian England by pure fiat, but once Sir Boss gets there he proceeds to create an alternate past in which medieval Camelot acquires his modern American technology. Twain erases the alteration of history at the end; he's not quite ready to create an alternate present or play with time-travel paradoxes, but the basic technique of the alternate world story as an offshoot of the time travel story is all there.

So in literary terms, the basic modes of what we now publish under the logo of SF—fantasy, science fiction, the alternate world story—had all been developed long before Hugo Gernsback published the first issue of *Amazing Stories*.

Gernsback did not invent science fiction; what he invented was only sci-fi. Even that is questionable, for Gernsback's formula of action-adventure plotlines carrying displays of technological wonders owes much to Jules Verne, who, if nothing else, was the first hard science fiction writer, and self-proclaimedly so.

As such, he looked askance at the likes of H.G. Wells, even as his inheritors were to look askance at Wells' New Wave literary descendents. In a sense, the tension between "sci-fi" and "science fiction" began right here. Verne was not much of a storyteller and still less a master of characterization; for him, the technological extrapolation was central, and he would have found a happy home in the pages of John W. Campbell's *Astounding*.

But Wells was really the first to demonstrate the enormity of science fiction's central literary virtue. Namely that in the modern world, with its intellectual banishment of the supernatural to the guru farms of central California, with its exponentially mutating technosphere, with its Faustian domination of nature, it is difficult indeed to deal with the interactions of your characters' psyches, with the external environment, with the individual's position in the body politic, with the forces of history and destiny, with the evolving nature of human consciousness itself, *without* being constrained to write science fiction.

Wells' ambition was literary and he was a committed Fabian socialist. Much of his science fiction centered on political speculation, at times on didacticism, and though

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in many ways he was a far more puissant technological extrapolator than Verne, his concern was almost never with the technology itself, but with the impact of technology on history and culture. He transformed the disconnected intellectual utopia into the modern political science fiction novel. Science fiction gave the literary artist in him the mode in which to speculate on history and destiny, and it gave the socialist in him the means with which to present his visions as something achievable.

And that is certainly a central literary virtue of science fiction.

In the modern context, you cannot make the reader believe in the possibility of your visionary transformation of society, environment, or consciousness without writing it.

Indeed, given the speed of technological and social evolution versus the exigencies of publishing schedules, it is damn difficult to even write a politically and socially engaged contemporary novel, a realistic novel that places its characters in the full context of the surrounding society, without it turning into a historical on you before it can hit the racks.

This central literary virtue of science fiction is also central to the intellectual health of our society, for science fiction is arguably the only fictional mode whereby a rapidly mutating technological culture may examine its own evolutionary processes and game out its next moves.

And *that* is the main literary reason for writing science fiction in this day and age. Sci-fi may have been born in 1926 with *Amazing Stories*, but science fiction is the literary consequence of the Age of Reason, the Industrial Revolution, the rise of the scientific worldview itself, and is in a certain sense a cultural inevitable.

That is why people with literary bones to pick in this enormous area of central cultural concern are constrained to write science fiction, even when, like Margaret Atwood, they and the publisher loudly proclaim they are doing nothing of the kind. Maybe it is even why writers like Atwood, skilled literary craftspeople with something to say that requires the mode but with an indifferent attitude to the existing body of science fiction, nevertheless end up reinventing it for themselves, warts and all.

The Handmaid's Tale is in one sense an oft-told story, a dystopia set in a near future United States, aka "the Republic of Gilead," which has become a fascist theocratic state. We follow Offred, the handmaid of the tale, through her daily rounds as the bondservant of her master and mistress, through a forbidden love affair, and into contact with the resistance.

But you really *haven't* read this one before.

For one thing, the Republic of Gilead is the damnedest hybrid of far right born again Christian patriarchy and radical feminist separatism.

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You've got a straightforward neomedieval patriarchal Christian theocracy complete with extreme sexual repression and the divine right of Big Daddy. The "handmaids" wear modified nun habits and are taught, indoctrinated, and bullied by "Aunts" in institutes much like schools for nuns.

But the Aunts' party line, far from being worshipful of the male lords of divine creation, promulgates the doctrine that sex is male rape, and that women, who have once more become male property, need the very system that oppresses them to protect them from the gross natures of the male beasts whose interests it serves.

Not as loony as it seems on the surface, for this bizarre marriage of feminist separatism and born again patriarchal theocracy admirably serves Atwood's social fascist state.

The "handmaid" is the flunky of the mistress of the house, who in turn is entirely subservient to her "Commander." But in this future, environmental pollution has severely reduced fertility, and the handmaid is chosen for her childbearing ability. Her other job is to have sex with the Commander of the household until she gets pregnant. After the baby is born, it becomes the official child of the Commander's wife, and the handmaid is shipped off to serve as surrogate broodmare for the next high status stallion.

But hey guys, don't get to thinking this is a sexual paradise for men either. Atwood has created a new perversion, and the officially prescribed act is not much fun for any of the three participants.

Yes, the *three* of them.

The wife reclines on the bed with her legs aspraddle and the handmaid positions herself between them and the Commander grinds away listlessly at her for as long as it takes to get his seed planted. By Talmudic legerdermain, the biological exigencies are rationalized with the theocratic demands of monogamy, for psychically at least, no true act of adultery is committed, since the act is entirely dehumanized. The handmaid is reduced to the role of a marital appliance, nobody talks to anyone, and no one enjoys it.

Thus both men and women regard sex as an onerous reproductive duty, a disgusting act; indeed, it is turned into a disgusting act as a matter of official policy, and so Atwood beautifully demonstrates how tyranny's deep motive power derives from sexual repression whatever the ideological superstructure, while daringly drawing the psychopolitical equation between Christian and feminist brands of anti-sexuality in the bargain.

This is certainly science fiction by any Wellsian criterion, and of a high order. Only at the end does Atwood reinvent for herself the pitfalls of sci-fi.

Whereas the typical sci-fi novel would run this material through a rebel against the system plotline

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and probably have the heroine partake centrally in a successful revolution, Atwood focuses on the quotidian details of her handmaid's life for the most part, which may include involvement with a resistance, and a sojourn in a den of cynical iniquity, but which does not involve macropolitical matters, and does not culminate in triumphant liberation.

Through page 295, Margaret Atwood gives us a textbook demonstration of how a "mainstream" writer of talent, free of all sci-fi formula constraints, can renovate an old science fictional notion, not only by conceptual freshness, but by shifting the central focus away from action adventure formulas and onto the psychological and the personal. The novel concludes, unexpectedly enough, with a "Lady or the Tiger" ending. Offred steps into a van, not knowing whether she is being dragged off to durance vile or on her way to escaping into Canada.

The way the story has been set up psychologically, this is a satisfying closure literarily speaking; no pat demolition of what has been set up, but not entirely hopeless on a personal level. A realistic ending to a realistic and rigorous science fiction novel.

But then, as if to prove that even someone who looks down on science fiction even while she is writing a fine job of it is still not immune to the virus of sci-fi, or as if some editor freaked at the novel's true ending and talked her into it, Atwood appends a schlocko sci-fi afterword in a silly tone at variance with everything that has gone before, in the form of the proceedings of a congress of supercilious academics picking over the bones of her handmaid's tale in a future fuzzy ecotopia long after wicked Gilead has fallen, thus assuring us that the black hats were eventually defeated and our heroine survived to commit her tale to posterity.

Let ye among you who are without pulp sins cast the first stone. Let whoever does *The Handmaid's Tale* in paperback consider ending the book on page 295.

The black hats are entirely exterminated by the end of James Morrow's *This Is the Way The World Ends*, but the black hats in question are us, all of us, to wit the human species, for this novel is just what it says it is, a tale of our terminal nuclear extinction.

God knows this has been a staple of science fiction at least since Hiroshima, but it has seldom been presented in this mode. Morrow's first novel, *The Wine of Violence*, was realistic in tone and quite well done, and his second novel, *The Continent of Lies*, was a witty Sheckleyian space romp with both humor and bite. Here he attempts to mix the two tones, or anyway that's what he ends up with.

Needless to say, you can present nuclear extinction as a comedy of assholery à la *Dr. Strangelove*, or you can render the tragic pathos, as for instance Sturgeon does so masterfully in "Thunder and Roses,"

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but it is something else again to try for both effects simultaneously.

Morrow might actually have made it, for he dares what no one rooted in sci-fi conventions ever would; he centers the novel on a puissant piece of imagistic surrealism.

As the bombs fall, the "unadmitted" manifest themselves in Antarctica. The unadmitted are the future generations that would have been born but who will now never be admitted to life, who spring into full being with false memories of the full lives that might have been, tormented by their own unreality, destined to disintegrate shortly, and outraged at the human race for having preempted their existence.

This is where fantasy borders on science fiction and science fiction borders on magic realism, and who gives a damn as long as it works. This is true surrealism, where the power of the image is its own raison d'être, but it is also science fiction, since the impingement of this actualized image on events is treated in a more or less rigorously extrapolative manner. Given the right image, generating the right schtick as it impinges on reality, one can make a powerful emotional and thematic statement and get laughs at the same time, as Vonnegut does in *Cat's Cradle* when Bokonon lies down on the ice and freezes himself into statuary giving the finger to You Know Who.

But alas, what the unadmitted do is snatch up some of the remaining humans, military industrial types, but also the hapless and basically innocent protagonist, and stage a Nuremberg trial. This trial consumes nearly a hundred pages of a three hundred page book, and much of the rest of the novel is a set-up for it, too.

The endless trial sequence, like most of the novel in general, is a melange of farce and realistically portrayed existential angst, perhaps the most cogently rounded discussion of nuclear deterrence scenarios in fiction and stand up comedy, pratfalls ending in a multiple hanging rendered in psychologically gory detail.

Well, this has to either succeed as a glorious tour de farce, or fall on its face. William Burroughs just might have been able to pull it off. Morrow doesn't. He presents his case on nuclear strategy and moral responsibility, and a complex and well-rounded case it is too, but he does it by giving us buffoon characters delivering long dissertations on doomsday strategy intercut with humor that just isn't funny enough to sustain interest during all these speeches.

This Is The Way the World Ends is the famous exception that proves the rule, for maybe Morrow would have benefited from some of the pulp tradition's strictures in this one. His protagonist is a wandering everyman viewpoint who spends a third of the novel sitting on his ass in a courtroom, and the whole middle third of the novel lacks any real narrative structure or tension.

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James Morrow not only had things he wanted passionately to say about nuclear destiny, they were interesting and complex things that were well worth saying. And in the "unadmitted," he has a puissant piece of science fictional surrealism with which to concretize it into emotionally powerful imagery.

But along about the middle of the book he got a little too passionately interested in the message and not enough in the craft of storytelling. When a political science fiction novel fails, it is usually into didacticism, and even attention to a simple plot skeleton form of tensions and releases may be enough to keep the narrative focused on story.

Notice that it is *not* the surrealistic imagery that fails, even when the humor falls flat, but the pace and timing and narrative tension.

No doubt there are those who would contend that science fiction and surrealism cannot cohabit, that imagistic logic and extrapolative rigor are antithetical, that surrealism is by definition fantasy.

On the other hand, one man's surrealism is another man's scientific worldview, as Einstein said to Newton. A. A. Attanasio has always employed a rather idiosyncratic brand of astrometaphysics that would curl Sir Isaac's wig and might even send old Albert to a session with his violin. It was neatly confined to a nice bit of narrowband extrapolation in *Radix* where it worked admirably. It got a bit out of hand in *In Other Worlds* where it became too much and too central for credibility.

In *Arc of the Dream*, it works just fine. The McGuffin is the intrusion into our universe of an alien being from a space-time whose entirely arcane nature I will not attempt to paraphrase here. Whether Attanasio's cosmological physics is surrealism or not depends in part on your opinion of dancing wu li masters, for he forthrightly integrates it with eastern mysticism here, and celebrates the spirit of the whale.

But he does it with such forthright good humor, and through such believable and winning human characters, and always through an entertainingly paced story, that the novel succeeds whichever way you take it. Attanasio takes the basic plot skeleton—his sympathetic characters must return the alien being to his power source to save the world and there are baddies to impede them—but he uses it as a structure on which to tell multiple stories of personal maturation and spiritual redemption.

Attanasio comes at science fiction from a quirky direction. It is not so much that he eschews pulp forms and straightforward story telling as that his truly felt worldview on things both scientific and metaphysical is at variance with the accepted hard-science western esthetic. He starts from a different mind-set, he views from a different angle, he extrapolates along different vectors, and his ultimate con-

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cerns are metaphysical and spiritual.

You might not want him teaching high school physics to your sister, but if this is surrealism, it is precisely *science fictional* surrealism, poetically altered reality rendered with rigorous and convincing verisimilitude, just like a Dali painting.

Lisa Goldstein's *The Dream Years* is the converse, a science fiction novel *about* surrealism, the historical Parisian surrealist movement, and what surrealism itself means in terms of the human spirit. It draws the equation between the surrealist esthetic and the May 1968 Paris uprising, and finally generalizes its terms to equate surrealism with the revolutionary impulse and the revolutionary impulse with freedom of the spirit itself.

Goldstein does this by taking surrealists and May revolutionaries alike together into the future as comrades to man the barricades with yet a third band of revolutionaries fighting a far worse tyranny than either of them have yet faced.

And they succeed not by the bomb and the Kalashnikov but by the weapon of the spirit, by unleashing surrealist imagery into the landscape of tight-assholed order, fracturing its reality and letting the sun shine in.

Is this surrealism?

For sure!

Is it science fiction?

How many fans can dance on the tip of a propeller-beanie?

Whether you choose to consider *The Dream Years* formally science fiction or not, it certainly partakes of the central esthetic thereof, and demonstrates its unity with surrealism on the level where form follows function.

Dali, the quintessential surrealist, painted his dreamscape images with the realistic draftsmanship of Bonestell space art, and then some, just as the literary techniques of science fiction suspend the modern reader's disbelief in the unreal by convincing extrapolative detail and psychological realism.

Both surrealism and science fiction do this in order to erase the sharp border between psyche and external environment, verisimilitude and imagination, mythic imagery and the realm of the possible, and create a "fictional" universe in which they all interact on the same reality level. Both demonstrate how the signifying image and what is being signified can be one and the same.

Both therefore create visions which are not so much supernatural fantasies or stylized abstractions as the illusion of alternate valid realities, rendered with the verisimilitude of photographic realism, but organized along arbitrary but internally consistent worldview parameters designed to illuminate some aspect of our inner reality.

Okay, so this is admittedly the edge of the envelope of what may legitimately be called science fiction; beyond science fictional sur-

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realism or surrealistic science fiction, we are in the realm of Latin American magic realism, where reality can mutate sentence by sentence, image by image, along *no* consistent parameters save the poetic exigencies of the moment.

What gives magic realism its "realism"—if anything does—is that all its imagistic transformations are deeply rooted in and manifestations of a deep and rich historical and cultural matrix embedded in the mind and memory of the native reader. Indeed, many magic realists consider themselves the renovators, even in a way the *inventors* of Latin American culture.

But strangely enough, when you come across a piece of *North* American magic realism like Steve Erikson's *Rubicon Beach*, you're back to something that works the border zone where science fiction and surrealism mingle.

Rubicon Beach is magic realism indeed, in that events and scenes follow poetic and imagistic rather than causal logic, many magical transformations occur, structure is emphatically nonlinear, and even the resolution is almost entirely imagistic, gibberish in conventional plot terms.

But the psychic and cultural landscape is not that of Latin America but of the United States, indeed of America One and America Two, the historical American Dream, and its future decline into entropy, to put it far less complexly than Erikson does.

Past and present, America One and America Two, narrative realism and skeins of surreal transformation, intermingle quite freely here. Scientific rationales for all that happens are nowhere to be found, but somehow, because this is *American* magic realism, it has the feel of science fiction, not fantasy.

This is a kind of Ballardian America, with its drowned Los Angeles, its endless railroad journeys, its Hollywood hotels, its actors and screenwriters, its Yggdrasil in the western desert, America as a metaphor, somehow, of America itself. Or America One and America Two as metaphors for each other.

But Erikson, unlike Ballard, is an American, and therefore, unlike Ballard's America, which is essentially the metaphorical America of a European sensibility, *his* surreal American landscape is that of a *product* of that inner America, not an outside observer.

Just as it is difficult to imagine a North American writing Latin American magic realism, so it is hard to imagine anyone but an American writing this sort of *American* magic realism, and for the same reason. Magic realism almost has to be written from the inside out, for the organizing principle is neither causal logic nor the generalized Jungian unconscious mythic structure, but the cultural consciousness out of which it arises.

That most Latin American magic realism is concerned with past history and has the feel of fantasy says as much about the nature of Latin

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American consciousness as it does about literary style or form. That most American magic realism—like *Rubicon Beach*, like Thomas Pynchon's *V* and *The Crying of Lot 49*, like most of William Burroughs, like a good deal of Bradbury—feels like science fiction says a lot about an American consciousness that somehow draws its cultural roots, its weltanschauung, its characteristic guilts, fears, hopes, longings, and inner imagery not from contemplation of the complexities of its past but from visions of its future.

And that is what ultimately connects the inner heart of this kind of American magic realism with science fiction no matter the superficial divergences, that may also be why about twenty percent of the fiction published in this country is science fiction, and that may be why all these writers, and many more who do not write sci-fi or wish to, find themselves nevertheless writing science fiction whether they are willing to admit it or not, whether they even know it or not.

If there's one thing all these writers share with traditional sci-fi practitioners and with each other, with science fiction writers everywhere, and with some deep cultural tropism of the American psyche, it is a future-oriented worldview.

We all know that in our bones. We know that science fiction is inextricably bound up with multiple visions of the future. Even when science fiction is set in the past, the past is seen either as something that may be mutated to effect the present (its own future), or something that may exfoliate multiple futures, and almost never for its own sake as historical record.

This is so obvious that it forms the lowest common denominator definition of science fiction in the public perception.

Historical fiction is about the past, contemporary fiction is about the present, science fiction is about the future.

This, like most clichés, is a gross oversimplification, but like most clichés, it also contains an inner truth. Science fiction may be set in the present or the historical past as well, but it cannot be science fiction without accepting the mutability of history and world-lines, without relating the past or present milieu of the setting to the extrapolative principle.

And that, ultimately, is why so many writers of diverse styles, focuses, level of literary ambition, and attitudes towards "science fiction" nevertheless end up writing it.

For if the statement that science fiction is the literature of the future is an oversimplification, its converse would appear to be an absolute. Literature informed by future-oriented vision *is* science fiction.

In the last quarter of the twentieth century, how can the author of fiction peer along the timelines at all without writing it? ●

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SF CONVENTIONAL CALENDAR

by Erwin S. Strauss

Memorial Day is a popular con weekend. Also, note the rate rise coming soon for the 1988 WorldCon. Plan now for social weekends with your favorite SF authors, editors, artists, and fellow fans. For a longer, later list, an explanation of cons, & a sample of SF folksongs, send me an SASE (addressed, stamped #10 (long) envelope) at 4271 Duke St. #D-10, Alexandria VA 22304. The hot line is (703) 823-3117. If a machine answers, leave your area code & number. I'll call back on my nickel. Early evening's a good time to phone cons (most are home numbers) (be polite). Send an SASE when writing cons. Look for me at cons behind the iridescent Filthy Pierre badge.

MAY, 1987

22-24—**VCon.** For info, write: **Box 48478, Bentall Stn., Vancouver BC V7X 1A2.** Or call: **(604) 591-3061 or 738-8356 or 980-4025** (10 am to 10 pm, not collect). Con will be held in: Vancouver BC (if city omitted, same as in address). Guests will include: historian of fandom Sam Moskowitz, SF memorabilia collector Forrest J. Ackerman, artist Alex Schomburg. At the Gage Residence, U. of BC.

22-25—**DisClave.** Sheraton Hotel, New Carrollton MD (near Washington, D.C.). Gene (New Sun) Wolfe.

22-25—**BayCon. (408)446-5141.** San Jose CA. B. Longyear, Marta Randall, Hugo winning fan M. Glyer.

22-25—**CostumeCon.** Hyatt Regency, New Brunswick NJ. Annual SF costumers' meet. 3 masquerades.

29-31—**TexarKon. (501) 645-2459.** Sheraton, Texarkana AR. L. Niven, R. Asprin. Tim Hildebrandt.

29-31—**PhoenixCon. (404) 875-7326.** Lanier Plaza Hotel, Atlanta GA. M. P. Kube-McDowell, F. Pohl.

29-31—**Conjuration. (918) 438-3336.** Tulsa OK. K. E. Wagner, O. S. Card, Ed Bryant, T. Truman.

29-June 1—**RubiCon.** Newbury, Berks., UK. Chequers Hotel. A relaxacon with "sparse" programming.

JUNE, 1987

5-7—**LepreCon. (602) 968-7790/5749, or 839-2543.** Hyatt Regency, Phoenix AZ. Foglio, Feist, Potter.

5-7—**Nexus.** Howard Johnson's, Springfield MO. Ben ("Colony") Bova, Fred (Heechee) Pohl, D. Harris.

5-8—**SynCon.** Metropole Hotel, Sydney, Australia. Terry Dowling. A major regional con down under.

11-14—**DeepSouthCon, Box 4857, Huntsville AL 35815. (205) 776-3237.** Marriott Hotel. R. ("Psycho") Bloch, artist P. Foglio, H. B. Cave, femmefan Lee Hoffman, R. Campbell. The big annual Southern con.

12-14—**Ad Astra, Box 7276, Stn. A, Toronto ON M5W 1X9.** Howard Johnson's Airport Hotel. C. J. Cherryh, Francophone fan E. Vonarburg, Anglophone fan D. Gallagher. The 1987 Canadian national con.

12-14—**XCon, Box 7, Milwaukee WI 53201.** Oympia Spa, Oconomowoc WI. Hal Clement, Erin McKee.

AUGUST, 1987

27-Sep. 2—**Conspiracy, 23 Kensington Ct., Hempstead NY 11550.** Brighton UK. The 1987 World Con.

SEPTEMBER, 1987

5-8—**CactusCon, Box 27201, Tempe AZ 85282.** Phoenix AZ. 1987 NASFiC. $40 advance, $50 at door.

SEPTEMBER, 1988

1-5—**NoLaCon II, 921 Canal #831, New Orleans LA 70182. (504)525-6008.** $50 to 6/30, then $60.

AUGUST, 1989

31-Sep. 4—**Noreascon 3, Box 46, MIT PO, Cambridge MA 02139.** Boston MA. WorldCon. $50 to 9/7.

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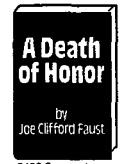

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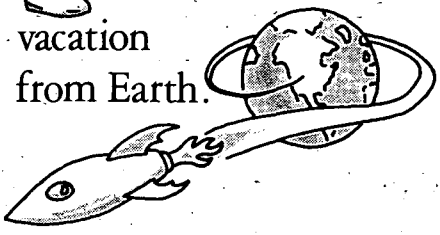

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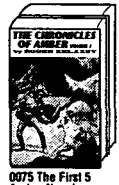

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